

Colin Connelly – a tribute

by John Farquharson, Beth Sprunt, Simon Whitehead, Wanda Powell, Helen Rose and Steve Rose

27 October 2023



Photo Credit: Helen Rose

Colin Connelly, who tragically died in a traffic accident in Ontario, Canada, on 2 October along with his partner Heather Frank, was an international development practitioner who over the past two decades had a profound impact on the education systems of numerous Pacific Island nations, and the people he worked alongside.

Colin, a Canadian-Australian, came to international development in the Pacific from the Western Australia Department of Education as an IT system expert.

At the time of his passing, Colin was actively supporting education management information systems (EMIS) with government counterparts in Fiji, Tuvalu and Solomon Islands, just starting in Nauru, and had worked previously in Vanuatu, as part of a number of Australian aid programs. His loss will have an immediate impact for all these countries as the teams and projects will have to regroup and find a way forward without Colin's expertise and his unique and valued way of working. This will not be an easy task, as Colin's contribution to these systems has been substantial and central to many, from inception to operation.

Colin's innate understanding of development, combined with his exceptional technical skills and determination to provide workable and contextually appropriate systems in every Pacific location where he worked, resulted in practical, effective systems taking account of geography, access to schools and internet. The resultant systems focused on school, student and teacher data, with education outcomes as the core concern – he was never distracted by superfluous or unsustainable additions.

His successful work in creating business process transformations through various EMIS has resulted in extensive changes within education ministries. These changes have enabled thousands of educators and administrators to access and utilise data every day. Colin's 'less-is-more' approach was driven by his commitment to value for money; he promoted simple system solutions that are practical and capable of generating the right data. This approach saved funds and allowed resources to be spent on other ministry priorities.

Colin was passionate about ensuring the data systems could support marginalised students. His work on disability disaggregation is held up as a pivotal example globally, and his approach always prioritised means of identifying disadvantaged students to enable support in classrooms and through equity-based grants and other resourcing requirements.

An important part of every project he led was to empower and train those who would manage and use the systems. This meant teams of people capable of using and managing their systems.

Acknowledging Colin, the Fiji Public Service Commission and Ministry of Civil Service **paid tribute to him** as follows:

Colin has been a long-term adviser to the Fiji Civil Service through the Australian Government for the past 15 years and has worked with various Government Ministries and Departments, especially the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Civil Service.

Colin developed the Fiji Education Staffing Appointment (FESA) an online tool to administer the 13,000+ MoE staff and further developed the MOE's FEMIS database in 2012 (which includes FESA) while an adviser with the Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP). He continued his work with the Fiji Education Program in the Fiji Program Support Facility and worked closely with counterparts at the Fiji Ministry of Education improving FEMIS to what it is today.

Colin also played an integral role in supporting the government's commitment for a centralised Human Resource Management Information System for the Fiji Civil Service. He was instrumental in the designing of the Whole of Government HRMIS system and actively played a major role from the design to the implementation of the system. Colin was actively and continuously contributing to the integration of the Fiji Education System (FESA) and the WoG HRMIS system, which is due to be rolled out early next year.

In his work, Colin always had a steadfast focus on the children, Ministry ownership and sustainability, and improving the work of the civil service as his key motivation in his work. Colin's contribution to the digital progress and advancement of these central systems and to the wider work of the civil service will not soon be forgotten.

Colin was an exemplary adviser, always available to help the team, to collaborate and willing to share his knowledge.

The personal attributes Colin brought to his work meant he has touched **many**

people everywhere he worked. Across Pacific Island countries there has been a collective outpouring of grief and acknowledgement and appreciation by those who worked alongside Colin.

Colin listened, was patient and respectful, sharing ups and downs, and the wins and the losses that inevitably occur in any development effort. He was seen as dedicated and brilliant. Colin was also universally thought of as hilarious, possessing a wonderfully dry sense of humour that he brought to work every day. This sparkling humour, combined with his openness as a person, happily sharing his own trials and tribulations without fear or favour, connected him to his colleagues, made him unique, and underpinned his exemplary professional impact.

Colin Connelly's legacy through Pacific EMIS will live long with the teams and colleagues he supported, the education decision makers benefitting from his elegantly simple system solutions, and, most importantly to Colin, how these enable improved outcomes for students and teachers.

So many who encountered Colin, worked with him, or enjoyed his fine company at the office or at play will miss him dearly for years to come.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/colin-connelly-a-tribute-20231027/>