

Free education in Solomon Islands must be about more than fees

by Transform Aqorau, Hugo Bugoro and Anouk Ride

19 June 2026



Solomon Islands National University graduands of the Postgraduate Certificate in Security Studies with Faculty of Education and Humanities Dean Patricia Rodie, Vice-Chancellor Transform Aqorau and Australian High Commission Minister-Counsellor Cameron Darragh, December 2025

Photo Credit: SINU

Solomon Islands is beginning an important national conversation about free education. At one level, the idea is simple and powerful: no child or young person should be denied education because their family cannot afford it. In a country where many families carry heavy financial burdens, this aspiration deserves serious support.

But free education is not simple in practice. Education is never literally free. Teachers must be paid. Classrooms, libraries, laboratories and workshops must be maintained. Universities need lecturers, internet, utilities, student services and accommodation. Schools need learning materials, inspection systems and trained teachers. What free education really means is that costs currently carried by parents, students, sponsors or communities are transferred, wholly or partly, to government or another funding source.

The real policy question is therefore not whether education should be free. The real question is: free for whom, at what level, covering which costs, funded by whom and implemented in what sequence?

Free education might mean tuition fees only. It might include registration, examination and other student fees. It could extend to learning materials, laboratory costs, fieldwork, internet access, tools, uniforms, transport, meals or accommodation. At the tertiary level, especially for students from rural and provincial communities, tuition is only one part of the real cost of study. A student may still be excluded if they cannot afford food, housing, transport, data, a laptop, stationery or the opportunity cost of leaving family work behind.

A poorly designed free education policy can unintentionally weaken the very institutions it is meant to support. If fees are removed but not replaced by predictable funding, schools and universities will be asked to do more with less. If

enrolments grow without investment in teachers, classrooms, laboratories, hostels, digital systems and student support, access may expand while quality declines. Free education must not become unfunded education.

For Solomon Islands National University (SINU), this issue is critical. SINU must support wider access to tertiary, technical and professional education. But access and quality must move together. If more students enter the system, the university must have the staff, infrastructure, equipment and services needed to teach them well. Otherwise, free education will raise expectations without giving institutions the means to meet them.

The debate also needs to include curriculum. Education is not only about how many students enter classrooms. It is also about what they learn, whose knowledge is valued and what kind of society the education system is preparing them to build.

Curriculum development is often treated as a technical exercise: learning outcomes, assessment standards, subject content and classroom activities. But curriculum is much more than that. It is a statement about who we are, what we value, what knowledge we consider important and what kind of citizens we hope our children will become. In many ways, curriculum reflects the psychology of a nation.

This is why local ownership is important, here as elsewhere. SINU has national educators, teachers, academics, researchers and institutions that understand the country's languages, cultures, schools, communities, environment and development challenges. Our staff have been mentoring early-career academics and postgraduate training pathways to build a cadre of curriculum specialists, building regional collaboration with Pacific universities and networks to reduce reliance on external consultants, and thinking about how curriculum incorporates local languages, traditions and community priorities.

External expertise can be useful, but it should support local capability, not substitute for it. Too often, donor-funded projects in education place international consultants and firms at the centre while local institutions are invited in only at the margins.

That approach is neither sustainable nor empowering. It may produce reports and deliverables, but it does not necessarily build the national capacity needed to maintain, adapt and improve the education system over time. If development assistance is serious about capacity building, then local curriculum development, teacher education, research and institutional strengthening must be built into project design from the beginning.

In the Solomon Islands context, this means institutions such as SINU should be central to curriculum review, teacher training, research on learning outcomes and

the development of locally relevant teaching materials. SINU teaches many of the students who become teachers. Its staff understand the realities of rural schools, provincial communities, youth aspirations, employment challenges, climate change, food security, fisheries, agriculture, health, technology and public administration. These things are central to the future our children must be prepared for.

A free education policy should therefore be linked to a broader national education compact. Such a compact should include sustainable financing, local curriculum ownership, teacher development, performance support, modern technology access, stronger provincial delivery and clear pathways from school to technical training, university, employment and community development.

The government should model different scenarios before implementation. What would it cost to cover tuition only? What would it cost to cover all student fees? What additional funding would be required for materials, internet, accommodation, meals or transport? How much capital investment would be needed if enrolments increase? What funding formula would ensure that schools and universities receive resources on time? What accountability mechanisms would protect quality?

Donors also need to reset how they provide education support. Projects that use consultants, contractors and foreign support where local expertise is readily available should be reviewed and reformed. Partners need to cut scattered, discretionary or one-off funding in favour of programmatic and long-term funding to educational institutions so that they have time and resources to improve education outcomes.

These are not arguments against free education; they are arguments for making it work. Engaging with institutions like SINU through education research and ideas generation activities will be key to generating and incubating innovations that move towards free education.

Solomon Islands should not choose between access and quality. It needs both. Free education should widen opportunity, reduce inequality and build national capability. But it must also strengthen institutions, respect local knowledge and ensure that our children receive an education rooted in Solomon Islands while open to the world.

If Solomon Islands is serious about free education, it must also be serious about funding it properly, implementing it carefully and ensuring that the content of education is shaped by those who know the country best.

Author/s:

Transform Aqorau

Professor Transform Aqorau is Vice Chancellor of Solomon Islands National University.

Hugo Bugoro

Dr Hugo Bugoro is the Director of the Office of Research and Postgraduate Studies at the Solomon Islands National University.

Anouk Ride

Associate Professor Anouk Ride is a peace and conflict researcher with the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University and an adjunct at the Solomon Islands National University.

Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/free-education-in-solomon-islands-must-be-about-more-than-fees-20260619/>