

Pacific People first: the critical role of education

by Meg Keen and Manumatavai Tupou-Roosen

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Students studying at a computer lab in University of South Pacific Solomon Islands Campus.

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This is a further instalment in the [Pacific Family Matters series](#).

At the 2024 launch of the Pacific Academy of Sciences, Samoan Prime Minister Fiame Mata'afa highlighted [the critical role](#) of education partnerships:

Today's challenges transcend borders. They require international collaborations among scientists and experts of all disciplines to curate knowledge and scientific evidence that can inform public policy ...

But education outcomes are falling short. Now is the time to deliver on [Australia's commitment](#) to facilitate greater linkages between education systems and invest in partner-led initiatives to improve education outcomes.

People are, and always will be, the most important resource of the Pacific. And yet, [education performance and spending](#) is declining, leading Pacific leaders to call for more action. Goal Two of the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific* highlights the need for improved education achievement and the [2024 Pacific Islands Forum Communique](#) put a strong emphasis on the need for collective solutions. More strategic education investments will be critical for building national prosperity, resilience and local solutions in the face of rapidly growing populations, intensifying climate impacts and mounting social and economic challenges.

With limited resources to meet the growing need for higher education and technical training, greater regional cooperation can help increase the capacity and offerings of education systems, for example through collaborative course delivery, joint supervision and student/professional exchanges that create learning networks. Australia supports Pacific education delivery and critical institutions such as the multi-campus University of the South Pacific (USP), but bigger investments in institutional and professional education partnerships are needed to address education challenges and expand the reach of agencies providing regional support.

There are at least 15 universities serving the region, including new or enhanced national institutions. Duplication and funding shortfalls are already emerging. In Fiji,

courses overlap at USP and Fiji National University where complementarities and resource sharing could exist, such as within undergraduate science degrees. At the same time, information technology, digital connectivity and management systems are mostly inadequate to meet tertiary education and research objectives across the Pacific. The need for action has been recognised at the recent [Pacific Education Minister conference](#), which convened under the theme of “Transforming *Edukesen* for a Better Pacific” and focused on how regional cooperation could help support much needed teacher training, ICT development and the protection of indigenous knowledge and culture.

We are not starting from scratch. Pacific institutional agencies and research collaborations exist to advance regional education cooperation, agencies such as the Pacific Regional Education Framework ([PacREF](#)), the Pacific Islands University Research Network ([PIURN](#)), and the newly-established [Pacific Academy of Sciences](#) link diverse educational institutions. To be effective they require greater support over sustained timeframes. Already we are seeing high returns from sustained research partnerships in terms of professional pathways, policy-relevant analysis and data, and greater Pacific-led and designed research. Australian and Pacific universities have conducted joint research on [labour mobility](#), [election monitoring](#) and [inclusive development](#) over many years, even decades. The result of this long-term investment in training, facilities and data-set creation has yielded insights into changing trends affecting prosperity, regionalism and democracy.

While there are strong foundations for collaboration, connectivity and regional cohesiveness, they could be further strengthened. For example, PIURN provides seed funding for Pacific universities to work together on regionally important topics, such as climate resilience and migration. It also supports critical regional institutions like the Pacific Community Data Hub. It is an example of a Pacific-initiated and led agency with development partner backing. However, administrative capacity is wafer-thin with just over one full-time-equivalent staff member and only funding for about 10 small research collaborations each year. Any complementary research by Australian, New Zealand or other academic partners is ad hoc, not systemically supported. With additional resources, PIURN and other regional research efforts could achieve much more.

Education, of course, goes beyond classroom walls. There are examples where Pacific-designed learning and action programs create bridges between communities and classrooms. When adequately funded over time, they can generate unique and significant findings. The award-winning USP [Locally Managed Marine Areas](#) program, commenced in 2000, inspired partnerships between communities and scientists to collect and analyse data through collaborative learning networks, and then implement findings through local governance systems supported by national,

and even global, policy. This transformative approach attracted global attention and **spread around the world**, inspiring indigenous science, sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity protection in coastal communities.

Ultimately, education is about nurturing the leaders of tomorrow and ensuring that community and cultural ties remain strong. In practice, this means ensuring the next generation is well prepared to succeed in a world demanding new skills, complex analyses and global engagement. One consistent national priority across the Pacific is to lay stronger early education foundations. Partnerships to arrest slipping childhood literacy and numeracy need more attention. Getting **better results** in education at the primary level is key to higher education success, and must be linked to measures that improve teacher education, localise learning materials and improve institutional and professional support. Better education outcomes for the Pacific's children depend on getting the basics right but also require place-based approaches that better link learning to people, place and culture, and regional networks that support national efforts.

While the concept of the “Pacific family”, collaboration and cooperation are sprinkled generously across speeches and policies, in our experience the people in the family would benefit from strengthening national education systems, benchmarking progress so that we can learn from each other, and ensuring that regional resources and expertise can be efficiently accessed. Australia as a member of the Pacific family has a critical role to play to help bolster the “transformation of Pacific education”.

*This is part of the Pacific Family Matters blog series which explores priorities for the re-elected Labor government's engagement on development issues with the Pacific Islands region. The series draws on the expertise of the **Pacific Research Program**, a consortium led by the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University (ANU), in partnership with ANU's Development Policy Centre and the Lowy Institute.*

Disclosures:

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