

Skills sector reform in Vanuatu

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Trainees working on the construction of the Provincial Area Administration Office at Imlao village, South West Tanna

Photo Credit: Fenda Sam

In recognition of the centrality of human resource development to economic growth outcomes, DFAT-funded **skills development programs** around the Pacific region have been supporting skills sector reform and institutional strengthening since the late 1990s. The need to **navigate complex political-economic situations** at the national, provincial and community level makes the process of reform intricate, requiring time and sustained commitment.

Prioritising local leadership and demonstrating to partners a sincere **willingness to adapt** to unforeseen entry points and new opportunities in support of the reform agenda are two strategies skills development programs can usefully apply to support program delivery. Aid programs that fail to take advantage of and foster local leadership or be adaptive have proved to be invariably unsuccessful, while **those** that have these features are demonstrating tangible contributions to systemic change and sustainable results.

The **Vanuatu Skills Partnership** (the Partnership), a locally-led initiative between the governments of Vanuatu and Australia, has been successfully contributing to skills sector reform in Vanuatu since late 1998. Taking a case study from this nation-wide initiative, this article describes how the transformation of a local training institution in Tafea facilitated by the Partnership demonstrates reform is possible through coalition building and deep, flexible engagement with local community and provincial leadership. The Partnership has been involved in a range of activities with training providers throughout the country in particular working with smaller providers in rural locations that have demonstrated an appetite for skills sector reform.

Lume Memorial Rural Training Centre (Lume RTC) has a long history of delivering skills training in the Lume/Middel Bush area on Tanna Island. Lume was founded in 2002 by Jimmy Tom who has guided its evolution and expansion. In 2015 the

Vanuatu Qualifications Authority introduced national training provider standards for registration to help lift the quality of performance in the skills sector. Lume RTC achieved registration in 2016 but like many rural providers it has faced challenges since then to meet the national quality assurance framework standards. One challenge has been addressing the need for good governance with limited resources and organisational capacity.

In 2020 the Tafea Skills Centre, established by the Partnership and now integrated under the **Ministry of Education and Training (MoET)**, commenced supporting Lume RTC to address governance and operational issues through an innovative cooperative agreement. Key to this was the collaboration brokered between the MoET, Tafea Provincial Government, the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT) and the local Middel Bush community.

The Partnership, drawing on its experience supporting the multi-partner establishment of the **Malampa Handicraft Centre**, proposed a model to transform Lume RTC from a private-owner entity to a community company, the Namas Vocational Training Centre (Namas VTC). Extensive consultations were held onsite at Lume with the Middel Bush community and chiefs and Namas VTC staff, as well as representatives from the Vanuatu Financial Services Commission. As a result, the training provider was able to formalise ownership, governance, and management arrangements.

A shareholder group comprising the Tafea Provincial Government, VIT and the Partnership was established as part of the community company structure. At the same time, directors were appointed to a newly formed training provider board with representation from the Middel Bush community and provincial government stakeholders. To facilitate the transition to a more formal footing and to guarantee future operations, the Namas area Chiefs signed a memorandum of agreement transferring ownership of the land to Namas VTC. The initial meetings and work took place during the middle months of 2020, which was a particularly disruptive period given the impact of COVID-19 and TC Harold.

In parallel to the establishment of Namas VTC as a community company, the Partnership brokered an agreement with VIT – the country's national vocational training provider – to provide technical assistance to Namas VTC. The agreement included support for improvements with quality management, training and assessment resource development and delivery of accredited skills training.

VIT construction trainers travelled to Tanna in July 2020 to assist Namas VTC trainers with the delivery of an accredited construction qualification for the first time. The delivery of the course was designed around the construction of the Provincial

Area Administration Office at Imlao village, South West Tanna, in cooperation with the Tafea Provincial Government. Fourteen trainees completed the training and will graduate with a nationally recognised construction qualification. Following the completion of the course the graduates, with support from the Skills Centre, commenced setting up a local contractors' association. This will provide them with the opportunity to bid for provincial government construction contracts in future.

All training providers in Vanuatu are undergoing the process of re-registration following the initial five-year registration issued back in 2015. Namas VTC has completed the first part of the re-registration process and with support from VIT and the Partnership will achieve full registration this year.

The provider-to-provider support model between Namas VTC and VIT and the community company model for training provider governance and management are two innovations for the Vanuatu skills sector and the government's reform agenda. It is anticipated that other rural and remote training providers will adopt the Namas VTC development model where appropriate to meet the re-registration standards and expand the availability of nationally accredited training across rural areas.

The combination of a strong governance framework and upskilling in the delivery of accredited qualifications has strengthened Namas VTC's capacity to meet the national quality standards for training delivery. The success of the transformation of Namas VTC demonstrates that small rural training providers have great potential to contribute to national development. The key to success is innovation and adaptability and a commitment from partners to work together on locally-led change for a shared nation-building vision.

Disclosures:

The authors were all involved in the project to support the development of the Namas Vocational Training Centre as described in this article.

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