

Proposal for a Pacific Regional Training Institute

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AUSTRALIA'S involvement with the Pacific, and especially with the Melanesian nations of PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, is based on geographic proximity, shared history and security considerations.

In addition, in the context of building and maintaining good regional relationships while combating poverty and underdevelopment, Australia has a responsibility to assist its neighbours with issues related to governance, education, law, policing, health, water resources management, transport, economic development, the environment and nutrition.

Australia's interest in maintaining regional security is partly related to international terrorism but also flows from political and economic instability in our immediate region that has led to four coups in Fiji, one in Solomon Islands, urban riots in Tonga and Solomon Islands, instability in Vanuatu, governance issues in Papua New Guinea, and economic mismanagement in Nauru and Solomon Islands.

There are also potential difficulties associated with outside influence in the Pacific region, and climate change.

Australia spends about \$1.1 billion in development aid in the region each year, with a concentration on Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste.

Much Australian development assistance revolves around security and the maintenance of human and physical infrastructure.

Too often, it seems Australia dispatches to the Pacific personnel who are under-prepared for their role. The contributions these people make to national public services are frequently ineffective and may leave a residue of resentment amongst nationals whose high expectations were unrequited.

On the other hand, anecdotal evidence suggests that many Pacific Islands public servants, although equipped with a university degree, find difficulty in operating efficiently because an 'idealised' education in developed countries has not equipped them appropriately for the realities they face back home.

The foregoing examples all point to a 'strategic imbalance' in the relationship between Australia and Pacific Islands nations at the point at which planning transforms into delivery.

This imbalance derives from a mismatch between the intentions and expectations of development aid and the realities of its implementation.

From 1947-73 the Australian Government operated the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA) at Mosman in Sydney. ASOPA's main function was to train Australian patrol and education officers to work in Australian territories, primarily Papua New Guinea and the Northern Territory.

A core attribute of then training was to equip these young Australians for the precise cultural and physical environment in which they would have to deliver the desired public policy outcomes.

In 1973, with independence looming in Papua New Guinea, ASOPA was integrated into the structure of the Australian Development Assistance Agency/Bureau as the International Training Institute.

It trained people, generally at the level of middle management, from developing nations in the Pacific, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, generally in three-month programs in areas such as human resource management, industrial relations, health administration, communications development, educational administration etc. ITI was disestablished in 2001.

Conclusions of current relevance that can be derived from the cases of ASOPA and ITI are that specific training is needed to equip professionals to engage knowledgeably with the cultural and social environments in which they will be operating in the Pacific and that there is a beneficial effect when comparative country experience is brought to the training process by participants themselves.

There needs to be role equalization between sponsors and participants to avoid any suggestion of paternalism (top-down direction or "we're helping you" intimations).

Great benefits occur from facilitated dialogue (including expert contributions) among people of influence in their own countries interacting, addressing issues and sharing knowledge with people of influence from other countries.

The central argument of this proposal is that achieving the integration of development assistance efforts in the Pacific lies in a new approach to education and training to reformulate them in a structure that will

better meet regional needs and overcome observed deficiencies in the delivery of development aid.

Australia has already committed to part of this approach by creating the Australia-Pacific Technical College. What is proposed here is a Pacific Regional Training Institute based in Australia for certificate-level administrative and information systems training for public servants: preparing Pacific Islanders to translate international and national policy and development strategies into practical achievable results; and preparing Australians (and perhaps New Zealanders) to work in the Pacific Islands.

This Pacific Regional Training Institute will ensure that Pacific Islands nationals are educated and trained in a way that is consistent and commensurate with the realities they will face in their own countries.

It will equip Australians delivering development assistance in Pacific countries with the cultural and other skills required effectively to undertake their mission and orient them to their task and provide opportunities to influential people from Australia and Pacific Islands nations jointly to address major issues of mutual concern, with the intent of arriving at new, or integrating existing, strategic pathways to resolve those issues.

The proposed institution will model an approach and act as an exemplar for other institutions engaged in similar projects and activities. The proposed institution will:

- Train Australians and New Zealanders and other Pacific Islanders who work in various capacities in Pacific nations.
- Train people from Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and other nations in matters such as governance, public service management, data storage and use, conflict resolution and issues related to social and economic development.
- Orientate Australians and New Zealanders intending to work in the Pacific to cultural nuances and to techniques of navigating through the complex situations in which they will operate.
- Orientate Pacific Islanders who work in Pacific nations other than their own.
- Initiate a program of seminars and workshops to enable senior administrators to discuss critical regional issues in a comparative way, to develop better understandings of policies and techniques that may help resolve these issues.

This proposal suggests the proposed institution is best placed in Brisbane. Queensland has the advantage of geographic proximity to

our largest Pacific neighbours, is the main air-travel gateway, and has considerable trade links with the Pacific Islands.

A Brisbane base would broaden the base of Australia's Pacific training and also utilise a range of State institutions. Queensland educational institutions, such as TAFE, Queensland University of Technology, Griffith University, the University of Queensland and the Queensland public service are well equipped to provide the initial resources for this initiative.

Collaboration will also include the Queensland Government, the Commonwealth Government and other institutions. By virtue of its physical facilities and its collective staff experience, UQ is best able to host a Pacific Regional Training Institute.

UQ has the capacity and the expertise in development studies to support the establishment of a Pacific Regional Training Institute, based on the Ipswich Campus and the Gatton Campus. UQ's commercial marketing company UniQuest is already involved in a range of consultancies in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and other areas of the Pacific.

Australia must seek out an appropriate relationship with the Pacific. This will not be defined only by Australia, of course, but by each nation Australia transacts with in the Pacific.

This proposal suggests developing an institutional axis involving government, universities, technical and further education colleges, NGOs and the private sector to create a secure and sustainable relationship between Australia and its Pacific neighbours.

Australia needs a new approach to equip people with the intellectual, technical and policy skills to tackle these issues in a mutual and coordinated way that would supplement the Australia-Pacific Technical College.

While the ASOPA and ITI rationales are no longer relevant to the current situation, some of the concepts on which both were based remain—preparation for effective engagement in a different cultural context and training citizens of developing world nations to be effective managers of their own futures.

Source: Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies (AAAPS) National Report 2009, Appendix 11. A longer and more detailed proposal was presented in 2008 by Clive Moore, University of Queensland, and Keith Jackson, ex-President, Papua New Guinea Association of Australia, to the Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs.