



Feedback on priority issues for the
Review of Australia's Higher
Education System

A scholarship program for the
Pacific

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December 2022

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Feedback on priority issues for the Review of Australia's Higher Education System: a scholarship program for the Pacific

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Introduction

One of the terms of reference for the Review (6. Quality and sustainability) refers specifically to an international education sector 'reflecting the important role international students play in our society and economy, and Australia's interest in deepening partnerships abroad'.

In this submission we propose a new initiative, with a suggested title of the Pacific Scholarships Program, aimed at deepening the partnership with Pacific nations.

Background

China's growing influence in the Pacific region has highlighted the importance of Australia developing strategic initiatives that advance Australia's interests. Australia has tended to regard the Pacific as a source of labour for low skilled jobs such as fruit picking. The pandemic disrupted this arrangement, but it did highlight the paucity of educational initiatives at the tertiary level in the Pacific region. Our proposal is to provide vocational education to people from the Pacific which would enable them to work in Australia at a higher skill level.

Australia, of course, has a long history of providing education as a way of building links with other countries. Notable is the Colombo plan. This program allowed students from south-east Asian countries to obtain a scholarship to study in Australia and on completion return home. This plan operated from the mid-1950s until the 1970s. It was the forerunner to fee paying international students studying in Australia.

It is widely accepted that the Colombo plan has been one of Australia's most successful soft power initiatives. The plan was not only designed to build an Asian academic elite and influence their values but also to secure diplomatic and commercial relationships with Asia.

A more recent program, the New Colombo plan, was introduced in 2013. This plan enables University graduates to undertake internships in a diverse range of countries, again designed to build links internationally.

The only other major educational initiative is the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC – formerly the Australia-Pacific Technical College) which was announced as an Australian Government initiative at the Pacific Islands Forum in 2006. It is administered by Queensland TAFE and provides Australian qualifications from lower-level certificates to diplomas in selected vocational areas in country. Countries involved include Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

One motivation of the scheme was that Australian-standard skills and qualifications would open doors to employment in the wider Pacific region for APTC graduates who are interested in migrating. However, it seems that outcomes in this regard are very modest. According to the 2019 Graduate Down the Track Survey, 5% of sampled graduates reported to have migrated from their home

country (according to the APTC website). To date only a handful of graduates have found skilled employment in Australia.

An issue for the initiative is that it offers Australian training package qualifications designed specifically for Australian conditions. The training packages can be difficult to transfer to local conditions. In addition there are very few programs that are relevant to women's employment in Pacific countries.

A scholarship program for the Pacific

We argue there are benefits for Australia in developing a scholarship program which locates students in Australia to undertake applied tertiary studies. These benefits are not only diplomatic but also economic, both for Australia and the Pacific countries which are the target of the program. The programs offered could be linked to areas where both Australia and the Pacific Islands have skill shortages such as health, community care, engineering, agriculture, construction supervision and project management. It is envisaged that graduates would have employment opportunities in Australia or in the home country.

It is likely that the scholarship program would need to have an orientation year in order to build foundation skills in literacy, numeracy and digital competence before the students embark on mainstream studies. The orientation year would emphasise general education skills within an applied context. Training packages with their narrow orientation would not be used.

We also envisage that the mainstream study would have a clear practical orientation and would involve a placement in Australian industry. The placement is key to ensuring good employment outcomes and would have to be substantive, as is the case for nursing, for example. Apprenticeships and internships come to mind, depending on the vocational area.

The benefits of scholarship program offering education and training in Australia targeted at Pacific nations are:

- students studying in Australia often work casually and send back remittances to their families;
- substantive placements with employers often lead to future employment. Unlike the original Colombo plan students will be able to stay in Australia at the completion of their qualification;
- the program would address areas where there are skill shortages in both Australia and the Pacific;
- the program can focus on areas in which Australia's infrastructure aid programs in the Pacific are being undertaken, thus providing a source of skills at the upper and lower intermediate middle level workforce.

We are not suggesting that any existing initiatives should be replaced by this scholarship program, but we are suggesting a very tangible means of contributing to a skilled workforce for both Australia and Pacific nations. It would provide long lasting benefits to all parties and send a strong signal that Australia supports Pacific nations educationally and through the labour market. It would demonstrate that Australia sees the Pacific as a valued partner in meeting regional and Australian skill needs and supporting growth in the region, and not just as a source of relatively low skilled labour such as is required for fruit picking.