

# NOTES FROM THE SOUTH PACIFIC: A RESEARCH PROPOSAL DISCUSSION PAPER ON PROFESSIONAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING TEACHING PRACTICE AT THE AUSTRALIA-PACIFIC TECHNICAL COLLEGE

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## **Abstract**

The Australia-Pacific Technical College (APTC) is an education aid program in the Pacific region and its purpose is to build the skills base of workers in Pacific Island Forum member countries in targeted industry sectors. The APTC has been variously described as “...an example of regionalism and an experiment in innovation” (Schofield et al. 2009) and “...at the top end of the regional vocational skills supply chain”.<sup>1</sup> The APTC School of Tourism and Hospitality and the School of Health and Community Services are managed by Box Hill Institute and deliver Australian vocational education and training programs at Certificate III, Certificate IV and Diploma level in three campus countries – Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu; with additional project work in Kiribati and Tonga.

The qualitative enquiry described in this research proposal discussion paper will examine professional vocational education and training teaching (VET) practice at the APTC and document how faculty members have adapted their professional practice into educational approaches responsive to the cultural environments of the Pacific. A qualitative methodology will be employed to show the ways in which the faculty members prepared themselves professionally for vocational education and training teaching assignments and how they view themselves as faculty members working in an aid program based upon a vocational education and training strategy of skills development and labour mobility. The central concern of this paper is to consider how faculty members manage the role of professional VET teacher working in an aid development context.

## **Introduction**

The Australia-Pacific Technical College (APTC) is an official development assistance (ODA) program funded by the Government of Australia (GoA) and managed through the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). The college commenced formal operations in Port Vila, Vanuatu in May 2007 with a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment program delivered to faculty members at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology. The purpose of the APTC is to build the skills base of workers in Pacific Island Forum member countries<sup>2</sup> in targeted industry sectors with

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/country/pacific/education.cfm> accessed 7 January 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The Pacific Islands Forum comprises 16 member states: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

the explicit outcomes of skilled workers graduating with Australian technical qualifications and the APTC and graduates recognised and valued by industry and governments in Pacific Island Forum member countries. The APTC School of Tourism and Hospitality and the School of Health and Community are managed by Box Hill Institute and delivers Australian vocational qualifications from Certificate III to Diploma level in three campus countries – Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu; with additional project work in Kiribati, Nauru and Tonga.

In terms of complexity, scale and scope of operations the APTC is a unique education aid program in the Pacific region. This statement is based on a number of features such as the offshore setting for the delivery of Australian vocational education and training (VET) qualifications under the auspices of the Australian Quality Training Framework 2007, the model of stakeholder engagement in each campus country whereby the APTC schools are co-located with local VET training institutions or industry and government partners, the performance assessment framework (PAF) and monitoring and evaluation components common to ODA activities and the management of a diverse group of VET teachers or faculty responsible for the training delivery of the programs in an aid, development cooperation setting.

AusAID recently completed an independent mid-term review of the APTC program (Schofield et al. 2009) and as the program has now passed the mid-way point the opportunity arises to undertake research activity to document and examine various aspects of the program's performance and ascertain what contribution the research might make towards a number of related yet separate themes such as understanding VET practice and pedagogy in the region, the development needs of VET practitioners working on short and long-term overseas assignments and the complexity delivering national qualifications in an international setting. More broadly speaking this research proposal has been developed against a background of broader issues such as the interface between education and “development”, tourism, hospitality and community services education for developing countries, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) policies and national TVET systems in the Pacific.

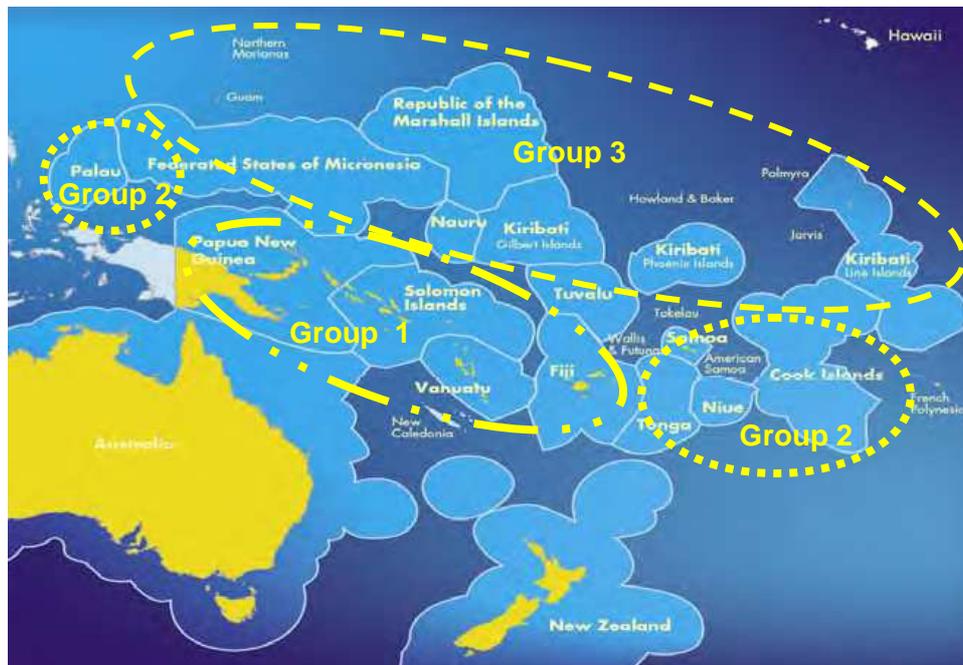
## **Literature Review**

### *Pacific Region, VET and Aid Donor Activity at a glance*

The Pacific Island region covers approximately one third of the earth's surface and has more than 7,500 islands of which fewer than 550 are inhabited (Asia Development Bank 2008 2008). The islands (Fig. 1) are divided into three cultural regions: Melanesia (including countries such as Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu), Polynesia (including countries such as Cook Islands, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu) and Micronesia (including countries such as Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Nauru, and Palau). Population densities vary between the regions and are among some of the highest in the world in places such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and RMI. The categorisation of Pacific nations in economic and development terms varies between different international bodies such as the United Nations, the European Union and the Asia Development Bank. For example, the latter in a report published in 2006 (Asia Development Bank 2006) on skills development in the Pacific categorised the 13

countries mentioned in the report into three socio-economic states: 1. Advanced island states, 2. Land-Rich Low Income Countries with Agricultural Potential and 3. Fragile island states (see Figure 1.) whereas the United Nations classifies the same nations as Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Four of the countries listed above, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Samoa and the Solomon Islands, are also classified by the United Nations as Least Developed Countries.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1: Map of the Pacific Islands by Category**



(Source: ADB Report “Skilling the Pacific”)

Most of the countries in this region are in receipt of large amounts of donor funding through government and non-government organisations that provide varying levels of support through activities such as bi-lateral or multi-lateral programs, technical assistance or capacity building programs and loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank (Coxon, Munce 2008). In terms of resources and stages of development there is significant diversity among Pacific nations although they generally have low levels of formal employment and a reliance on the informal and subsistence economies (Hughes, Sodhi 2008). Furthermore against several international measures such as the Human Development Index (HDI), the peoples of the Pacific are disadvantaged socially and economically compared with developed countries in the region (Prasad 2008).

**Table 1: Aid to the Pacific by donor, 2006-2008**  
*USD million, net bilateral disbursements*

Country	2006	2007	2008	3 year average
Australia	550	650	724	641
United States	187	172	188	182
New Zealand	113	133	156	134

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unohrrls.org/en/ldc/related/62/> accessed 7 January 2010.

France	112	134	148	131
European Union	78	71	94	81
Japan	76	70	73	73
Other Countries	33	15	22	23
Multilaterals:				
UNTA	8	10	85	34
Global Fund	5	11	16	11
UNICEF	5	9	7	7
AsDF	12	5	1	6
Other multilaterals	14	28	17	20

(Source: OECD, Development Cooperation Report, 2010)

At the post-compulsory education level, there are a number of specialist and general VET institutions across the Pacific region offering programs up to diploma and professional certificate level. The development of the VET sector is supported through the recently endorsed Pacific Education Development Framework (PEDF) 2009-2015 (aligned with the Pacific Plan which emphasises the need to strengthen and expand national and regional VET programs). In addition to stand-alone VET institutes such as the Samoa National University Institute of Technology or the Vanuatu Institute of Technology, most countries include some VET programs in their secondary school curriculum although Fiji is the only country that provides a pathway from VET studies at secondary school to higher level study through courses offered at the Fiji Institute of Technology (Asia Development Bank 2006). A number of Pacific nations are in the process of setting up national qualifications frameworks covering basic, primary, secondary, VET and tertiary education and some of the activity associated with the creation of qualifications frameworks and national training councils or bodies has been funded through bilateral support from NZAID, AusAID and the EU.

#### *Establishment of the Australia-Pacific Technical College*

The development of the concept for an Australian technical college in the Pacific began at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Meeting in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in October 2005 where the Prime Minister of Australia announced support for the establishment of an Australian Technical College for the Pacific (Pacific Island Forum Secretariat 2005). The proposal was endorsed by PIF leaders and AusAID was assigned responsibility for managing the whole of government response to developing the College. In May 2006 AusAID released a tender for the design of the APTC and at the 2006 meeting in Fiji PIF leaders welcomed the progress made on the creation of the college where it was announced the college's administrative centre would be established in Fiji. Acknowledgement was also given by the PIF leaders to the scholarship arrangements provided by the GoA that would support the participation of PIF citizens in the college's program (PIF Secretariat, Forum Communique, 2006). The establishment of the college and its operations are discussed in the Labour Mobility section of the Communiqué thus situating the development and future operation of the APTC within the context of development cooperation and aid assistance in the vocational education and training sector in the Pacific region, national immigration policies and employment options and opportunities in the region for skilled labour.

### *Design and Implementation of the APTC*

The design of the APTC was based around several schools delivering professional vocational education and training (VET) qualifications in a number of campus countries in the South Pacific (see Figure 2) either in partnership with local training counterparts (such as the National University of Samoa or the Training and Productivity Authority of Fiji), on site with industry partners such as Hastings Deering in Papua New Guinea. The initial phase of the program included training programs in Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa and Papua New Guinea with the following schools: Health and Community Services (SHCS), Tourism and Hospitality (STH) and Automotive, Construction, Electrical and Manufacturing (SACEM). As the impetus for the college's establishment was largely to respond to the demand for access to labour markets and promotion of labour mobility within the region, the design of the college specifically identified trades qualifications in a number of areas that were considered as skills shortages in local and international markets and that would provide opportunities for Pacific Islanders to travel outside the region in source of better employment options in terms of remuneration and career advancement. Since 2007 the APTC's operations have developed to a more complex operation that includes training delivery in non-campus countries and consultancy projects with local education ministries in PIF countries such as Nauru and Kiribati.

The vision of the APTC is to provide internationally recognised Australian-standard vocational training to increase the pool of skilled workers in targeted industry sectors (see Table 2), throughout Pacific Island Forum member countries and the mission is to train skilled workers from PIF member countries in targeted industry sectors so they graduate with Australian qualifications improving their local, regional and international employment opportunities. Thus the emphasis of the APTC's operations is on skills development and attainment of a technical qualification at a minimum Certificate III level (see Table 2), which is issued by one of two registered training organisations (RTO). With the focus clearly on developing skills, the APTC draws its students from the existing workforce and is not an entry-level college taking enrolments from students who have completed secondary schooling only; the other source of enrolments for the college is Pacific Islanders who have completed post-compulsory VET qualifications with a local TVET institutions in the region such as the Fiji Institute of Technology in Suva, Fiji or the 'Ahopanilolo Technical College in Nukua'lofa, Tonga.

**Table 2: Industry sectors and APTC STH and SHCS Qualifications**

<b>Industry Sector</b>	<b>Qualification Level</b>	<b>Location</b>
Hospitality and Tourism	Certificate IV and III	Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu
Education	Certificate IV	Fiji, Kiribati, Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga
Health and Community Services	Certificate III and Diploma	Fiji and Vanuatu
Personal Services	Certificate III	Fiji

The model of the APTC is complex with three Australian-based contract managers responsible for the combined activity of the college. There are two RTOs, Box Hill Institute (BHI) in Victoria and Sunshine Coast Institute of TAFE (SCIT) in Queensland responsible for the STH and SHCS and SACEM respectively. Sinclair, Knight, Mertz (SKM) in Melbourne is the third managing contractor with responsibility for managing the Coordination Office (CO) located in Nadi, Fiji. The CO provides support to RTOs in a range of areas not specifically related to training delivery such as scholarship management, student mobilisation, overall college marketing and acts as the secretariat for the college and point of contact with the client AusAID. Given the scale and scope of the program the administration and operational requirements of the college are extensive and involve a significant level of cooperation between the three contractors. The APTC Advisory Group (AG) makes up the fourth element in the management and operation of the college and is responsible for engaging with industry at national, regional and international levels. The AG's principal responsibility is to provide strategic advice and membership comprises representatives from Pacific Island governments, key industries in the region, Australian government and the APTC General Manager.

**Figure 2: Map of Pacific Islands and APTC Campus Countries (in capital letters)**



*APTC teacher practice and identity in aid/development education programs*

APTC trainers engage almost on a daily basis with issues of context and culture and how they manage themselves professionally and interact with the host cultures and work effectively in the aid/development context is of particular interest to this research proposal. They work in a variety of institutional settings and with a number of institutional partners and as such no program shares exactly the same set of circumstances in terms of student capability, facilities and resources and access to

professional development and support. This is partly due to the fact that the establishment of campus counties and partnerships with local training providers and/or industry partners was a central element of the design of the APTC; which has expanded in the last 18 months to take in training delivery in outer island and regional areas in Fiji and Vanuatu and several SIS such as Kiribati and Nauru. Providing training in culturally familiar environments, notwithstanding the fact APTC students come from different Pacific nations, reflects the view of Lauder (1998) who argues that learning in the context of developing countries occurs most effectively when completed in culturally appropriate environments and workplaces. The level of engagement in these issues is critically important in international development programs (Coxon, Munce 2008) and projects, most especially by international education planners, but also it could be argued by the VET practitioners who are responsible for delivering the particular programs on the ground and ensuring the project outcomes are reached

The work of a teacher requires a continuous shift in thinking about professional identity including concepts of commitment, sense of belonging, the value of the role and so on (Vahasantenen et al. 2008). The concept of professional identity for the APTC teacher it could be argued is determined and articulated differently when compared to their colleagues at their home institutions. This is due to the complex cultural environment they operate in and the unusual working arrangements (when compared with their previous VET experience and identity), for example, they are employed by an Australian-based RTO and yet for all intents and purposes work for the GoA on a high profile aid development program that is viewed differently throughout the region.

Coupled with the unusual set of employment circumstances is the high level of professional autonomy APTC teachers enjoy working on the program. Teachers have traditionally had a great deal of autonomy especially in matters relating to the content of their work and pedagogy and in the APTC given the remote nature of the program this is particularly the case. How the teachers negotiate their professional identity while working in a new cultural environment is a topic of interest to this research proposal. Essentially the questions the research is seeking to answer are how do APTC teachers see themselves working on this unique program and what if any changes have they made to their teaching practice and understanding of themselves as VET teachers in the process of responding to a new environment.

### *Policy Framework*

The college operates in a complex policy framework that extends beyond the immediate Australian context of the three contractors, to a broader regional context and further to an international context involving organisations such as the World Bank, the United Nations and the European Union. Fundamentally, the APTC functions as part of Australia's longstanding commitment to development cooperation and aid assistance in the South Pacific and working in this area presents a number of challenges to the RTOs managing the delivery of training on the ground who have hitherto largely delivered technical assistance programs or projects to commercial or government clients. How BHI has managed the implementation of the contract with AusAID including the deployment and support of teaching staff is of interest to this research in light of the policy landscape.

There are a number of national and international policy documents and/or frameworks that impact on the operation of the APTC. For example, the AusAID Education Strategic Framework was developed to implement “Better Education” the GoA policy for development assistance in education (AusAID 2007) and although the key focus of this policy is to assist developing nations to reduce poverty by providing more children with access to a better education, there were specific VET regional activities identified in the policy for the Pacific region such as the establishment of the APTC and assisting partners (nations) to reform their vocational education and training systems. Other national Australian policies/frameworks include the Australian Quality Training Framework 2007 responsible for the quality of training and assessment provided offshore by the RTOs. Regional and international policy initiatives of note include the Pacific Plan and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (in particular Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women and Goal 8: Develop a Global partnership for Development).<sup>4</sup> More recently the GoA has sought to increase its engagement with the region following the Port Moresby Declaration (PMD) signed by the Prime Minister of Australia and Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea in March 2008 and the subsequent development of specific Pacific Partnerships for Development (PPD) referred to in the PMD with eight PIF nations: Kiribati, Nauru, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Island, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Where the APTC intersects with or is impacted by the PPDs varies depending on the particular circumstances of each individual nation and the requirements for vocational education and training and workforce development in each country; for example, certain PPDs explicitly mention the APTC and others make reference to general, more broader VET sector activity.

## **Research Method**

The sample group for the proposed research includes APTC teachers that are currently working on the program in one of the three campus countries and teachers who have completed teaching within the last 12 months. An “availability sampling” approach will be used to represent the target population (Keppel, Saufley & Tokunaga 1991), an approach it is anticipated that will provide the opportunity to explore the perceptions and views of the sample group focussing on the issues and concepts described above. The research methodology will involve a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the participants’ response. It is anticipated that the multiple perspectives presented by the participants will provide a broad account of APTC teacher experience and at the same time data on individual experience and reflections. The research methodology has been designed to provide the opportunity for participants to provide data in different forms. For example, initial data collection will be done via an online survey and then at the end of that process teachers will be invited to participate in a structured interview that will include scope for elaboration on initial responses to the online questionnaire and opportunity to comment further on issues of particular professional interest or importance.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/gender.shtml>, accessed 4 December 2009.

Research “fitness for purpose” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007) has been applied to determine not only the sets or types of questions and the structure of the data collection methods but also the scheduling and completion of the data collection. This is necessary to address any issues that may impact on the collection of robust, meaningful data. For example, most of the intended participants are currently working offshore and there will most likely be a time lag between the time the data has been collected and analysed and the final completion of the research paper. As such the data collection activities will be scheduled in such a way as to limit interruption to teacher activity and yet provide ample time for participants to reflect on current and past practice.

## **Conclusion**

The APTC is a unique aid development program in the Pacific region and the scale and complexity of its teaching operations provide an opportunity to conduct research on VET teaching practice in an environment that is significantly different to standard VET teaching practice in Australia. Through the collection and analysis of data relating to a different elements or aspects of APTC training delivery and teaching practice it is anticipated the research will demonstrate not only how VET practitioners have prepared themselves for an overseas assignment but also how their role working on the program interacts with their identity (professional and personal) as VET teachers.

Furthermore, it is anticipated the data will document what activities and efforts BHI has implemented to prepare VET teachers for the overseas assignment with the APTC as managing contractor and the effectiveness of that preparation from the point of view of the trainers with their varied experience of the APTC programs in terms of campus location and length of service. Analysis of the data may also assist BHI to develop more effective workforce development strategies to support APTC teachers in the field and provide an opportunity to review past and current practice at the mid-way point in the contract. This is the first time a research proposal has been suggested for the APTC and VET teacher practice and represents an opportunity to contribute to further knowledge and understanding in a number of subject areas such as teacher preparation and efficacy, cross-cultural communication and cultural change and awareness.

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