

Critical Analysis of the Australian-Pacific Technical College (APTC)

The Australian Government is funding a four year **A\$150 million** aid development programme to the Pacific Island Forum members, in the form of the **Australia-Pacific Technical College (APTC)** that commenced formal operation in Port Villa, Vanuatu in **May 2007** with a *Certificate IV in Training and Assessment* programme delivered to faculty members at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology.

The **APTC** was setup to provide internationally recognized Australian-standard vocational training to increase the pool of skilled workers in targeted industry sectors 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 qualification at a minimum Certificate III level, which is issued by one of two registered training organizations (RTO). The APTC draws its students from the existing workforce and is not an entry-level college taking enrolment 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 National University – College of Engineering Science and Technology, previously the Fiji Institute of Technology, or the 'Ahopanilolo technical College in Nukua'lofa, Tonga.

Table 1: Industry sectors and APTC STH¹ and SHCS² Qualifications

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

Australian Parliament Senate Sub-Committee Report – Nov 2009

¹ School of Tourism and Hospitality

² School of Health and Community Services

According to the Australian Senate report on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade ***“Economic Challenges Facing Papua New Guinea and the Island States of the Southwest Pacific”***, that the APTC is on track to deliver **3,000** students by **June 2011**, (Vol. 1; © Commonwealth of Australia 19 Nov 2009) [11.16].

About **350** students from around the Pacific started their training with APTC when they started operations. The Australian Government established a scholarship scheme of **\$10m** to ensure equity of access from all Pacific Island countries. In 2007-08, the APTC offered **509** scholarships and up until 2008, **67** students had graduated from the college, most of them from the School of Hospitality and Tourism.

As of July 2008, hospitality and tourism had been the most popular choice of study among the applicants, with one in three wishing to undertake training in that field. However, most of the **584** students enrolled at the APTC study in the School of Automotive, Construction, Electrical and Manufacturing (**57%**). Up until **July 2008**, **67** students had graduated from the college, most of them from the School of Hospitality and Tourism.

The report highlighted the fact that there is a gap between the national and international standards which currently exists in Pacific Islands and the APTC is expected to bridge that gap by providing training to up skill the trainers. There was a strong criticism levelled at TVET in the region, including training systems that tended *‘to operate in isolation of labour market demand’* or *‘in the dark both on skills demand and supply’*.

According to the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, (DEEWR), the APTC’s role is to ***‘enhance rather than compete with existing training at local institutions and partner with other Pacific training and education providers to build on existing strengths within the region’***. The college is to address the region’s skills needs and increase workforce competitiveness as well as to assist mobility of skilled workers within the Pacific island countries and developed countries.

The DEEWR, according to the report, also highlighted the fact that the college is intended to address the region’s skills needs and increase workforce competitiveness as well as to assist mobility of skilled workers within the Pacific Island countries and developed countries. DEEWR explained that training corresponds to the labour and skill demands of employers and not to respond to reported skills shortage in Australia. There are Campus-Country Industry Advisory Groups to facilitate contact between the college and respective governments and industries and ensure the relevance of the courses to the host nations.

The Pacific Asia Tourism called for the Australian Government to review the purpose, function and performance of the Australian Vocational and Technical Colleges in the Pacific with the

view to **applying those resources to build the capacity of existing post-secondary institutions** to undertake those functions.

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) suggested Australia's assistance could **build linkages between training institutions to share skills development and to provide relevant, work experience for Pacific Island nationals in key industry sectors** and that Australia is well positioned to provide regional leadership in building the maritime skills base in the region with its world class maritime training and education system.

The Fiji's Acting High Commissioner to Australia expressed appreciation of Australia's support for, and funding of, education for Fijians, however, he proposed that Australia review its scholarship to Fiji nationals and instead of sponsoring Fijians at local institutions, it should increase the number of scholarships allowing study in Australia. He also suggested that as an alternative to scholarships, **Australia and other donors could fund the expansion of local institutions as this would address workforce shortages and staff retention challenges.**

Analysis and Comments

In the writing of this report, I tried to obtain some data from the APTC office in Suva and Lautoka but it was not forthcoming. However, I managed to obtain some reports and news items from the internet which I use with some justification for the following comments.

According to the Australian Parliamentary Senate report that by June 2011 the APTC hopes to *deliver 3000* students, however from the figures we can deduce that on average about 300-350 students are trained every six months, or about 700 students every year. Thus in the four year period (2007-2011), they would have trained about 2,400 to 2,800 students.

The total budget approved for the APTC was A\$150 million or FD\$275 million, in addition there was a scholarship scheme of A\$10 million (FD\$18 million), established by the Australian Government to ensure equity of access from all Pacific Island countries; a total of about FD\$293 million.

It must be noted that the duration of training for Certificate III and Certificate IV courses is about 6 months, thus 300 to 350 students can complete their training every 6 months.

Cost of Training

The cost of training each of the 3,000 students at the APTC is about FD\$97,666 (=FD\$293 million ÷ 3000); compared to one FNU Automotive student pays about FD\$2,093 (Regional

Student = FD\$9,174) for the 2 year Trade Certificate Programme; which is less than 10% of what it cost for an APTC student.

A Diploma in Automotive student completing a 2 year programme at FNU would pay about FD\$3673 (Regional = FD\$16,567). The cost of accommodation and food at any FNU Hostel is FD\$20/day or FD\$140/week equivalent to FD\$4480/year or FD\$8,960 for the 2 year duration of the programme. Thus a Trade Certificate student from the region would pay a total amount of about FD\$18,134 and a Diploma student FD\$25,527 for the full duration of their programme, inclusive of boarding and food. This is about 19% and 26% respectively of the cost of training one APTC student in 6 months.

Thus for equivalent the cost of training one APTC student, FNU could have trained about 5 Trade Certificate students or 4 Diploma students. Thus for the budgeted A\$150 million, FNU could have trained at least 12,000 Diploma students or 20,000 Trade Certificate students from the region (or 4 times more locals).

Other Factors

The APTC recognizes prior learning (RPL) or/and current competency (RCC), through years of relevant experience in the industry. Most of the certificates awarded by APTC is Certificate III and Certificate IV which is almost equivalent to a Trade Certificate programme that is why the pre-requisite to go into a Certificate III or Certificate IV training is at least 2 years of experience in the relevant field.

FNU Situation

As a result of the economic climate and the brain drain, which is unavoidable, the FNU is affected through the loss of well qualified lecturers and instructors in many specialized areas like Engineering.

One of the main consequence of this is as mentioned in the Australian Parliamentary Senate committee report which noted the weight of evidence suggesting that there is a serious disconnection between the courses offered by training institutions in the region and the requirements of local businesses and industries. This is a generalized statement which we could use to help us put an effective strategy in place.

FNU Awards Vs Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) 2007

The AQF is the main qualification standards recognized by industries and work places in Australia and New Zealand, and also for industries in the Pacific Island countries. The FNU

awards are based on credit points and the internationally accepted Academic levels. There is now a need to match or align the FNU levels with the AQF and to be recognized as such, at least in the key areas like Engineering and Tourism & Hospitality Programmes. Further to this the lecturers and trainers at FNU CEST and School of Tourism and Hospitality should undergo the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment as part of their Teacher Education Training.

This is in response to the comments and recommendation in the Australian Parliament Senate report (DEEWR) that the Australian Government should ***'enhance rather than compete with existing training at local institutions and partner with other Pacific training and education providers to build on existing strengths within the region'***. This will result in our FNU lecturers and instructors achieve the right competency and qualification to deliver the right standard of training that is required and subsequently raise the standard within FNU.

Concluding Remarks

The bottom line issue is funding as the above analysis clearly shows that the FNU can also achieve the same standard of graduates as APTC if given the same level of funding considering that it produces Diploma graduates, a higher qualification and longer duration, at a fraction (25%) of the cost.

The Australian Parliament Senate report also mentioned that the 2009-2010 Australian Budget had some allocations *'to support the education system in Fiji'* and to be consistent with the recommendations in the report, those funds should have been channeled to be used for the upgrading of FNU lecturers qualifications and also the facilities so that FNU could successfully meet the demand and expectations from the industry as well as the nation and region's work force.