

Australia-Pacific Technical College (APTC)

Purpose:

This submission seeks the Australian government to review the cost effectiveness of the APTC programs for countries like Fiji, compared to strengthening existing vocational education providers in the larger PICs.

Summary:

The APTC program funded by AuAid is not cost effective. This money could be utilized much more cost effectively by supporting local training programs in larger PICs, (for example Fiji) with long standing traditions of established vocational education providers, through strengthening their capacity to provide the same quality of vocational education. In this respect the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee Senate Committee, FADT's view in its examination of vocational training and APTC was: *"Evidence to this inquiry shows that Pacific island governments require training to build their capacity to deliver and manage their education services, as well as deal with donor requirements..."*.

Background:

APTC was a response from the Howard Government to calls by PICs for ANZ to establish a labour mobility program (e.g. seasonal workers) to give temporary employment to Pacific Islanders, particularly the unskilled. NZ had responded with concrete employment programs for seasonal workers while Australia opted to respond by providing the PICs with a technical training program which would provide skills to Pacific Islanders to enable labour mobility within the region. Australia had established this approach to soften PICs calls to provide opportunities for non-skilled labour to work in ANZ on "work holidays" for domestic political reasons. Some in the Pacific saw this program as a disguised one which hailed that the benefit of the scheme would be to provide much needed skills for local demand but which in fact was a training program for skilled migration to Australia. It will be recalled that there was a great skill shortage in Australia at the time of the inception of the program.

Although the PICs accepted the establishment of APTC through AusAid funding, there were misgivings in the larger PICs, especially Fiji because they had long established extensive vocational training programs of their own. They would have preferred Australia to provide funding to strengthen these rather than establishing a competitive approach which start a hierarchy of qualifications, with the APTC qualifications seen as elitist, since Australian qualifications were provided. The argument used by Australia was that these qualifications would provide alternative opportunities for the graduates to find employment in vocational areas in Australia, thus providing labour mobility.

There were two flaws to this argument. First this would create a brain drain of qualified people much needed in the PICS both for vocational work and to help strengthen staffing of vocational education programs in the PICs. The second one was that, for example, vocational qualifications from the Fiji Institute of Technology (FIT) and now the Fiji National University were always accepted in Australia for skilled migration purposes for skilled areas of employment shortage in Australia. In this respect, the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee recommended that:

“The committee recognises the problem of brain drain in the Pacific region and recommends that the Australian Government fund a study of both its scholarship recipients from the region and graduates from the APTC to obtain a greater understanding of the nature and extent of brain drain and of the incentives required to retain knowledge and experience in the region.”

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.

Mr Steven Noakes, Pacific Asia Tourism, told the Senate FADT Committee of a sense within the region that 'the big guys are bringing in their ideas and their resources, and what happened to our investment in our place and our need for vocational education and training?'

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**

Cost Comparisons:

I attach a Paper entitled “Critical Analysis of the Australian-Pacific Technical College (APTC)”, prepared for your reference. You will note from the Paper that for equivalent cost of training one APTC student, the Fiji National University's College of Engineering, Science and Technology (formerly the Fiji Institute of Technology), FNU could have trained about 5 Trade Certificate students or 4 Diploma students. Thus for the budgeted A\$150 million for APTC, FNU could have trained at least 12,000 Diploma students or 20,000 Trade Certificate students **from the region** (or even 4 times more local **Fijians**).

According to 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'. This will result in, for example, 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.

How successful this “enhancing” has been is moot.

Model of APTC

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, costly and requires effective levels of cooperation between the three contractors. Then, there is the APTC Advisory Group (AG) which makes up the fourth layer 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.

This structure could be simplified if local institutions were empowered and strengthened.

I look forward to hearing from you

With kind regards

Robin Nair