

Evaluation of the Pacific Islander Junior Professionals Programme (2013–2018)

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From left to right: Lucy Joy, from Vanuatu, Berry Muller, from Marshall Islands and Lui Bell, from Samoa, were among the participants to the SPC Pacific Islander Junior Professionals (PIJP) Programme. Image: Ariella D'Andrea

The Pacific Islander Junior Professional (PIJP) Programme, run by the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division of the Pacific Community (SPC), offers 12-month positions within FAME, to nationals and residents of Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) who are currently employed in a fisheries-related role. The evaluation of the PIJP Programme, summarised here, aims at identifying its strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for further improvement.

The PIJP Programme began in 2013 and 14 participants (six women, eight men) have participated as of April 2018, when the programme was evaluated.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with eleven PIJP participants (six past and five current) and six SPC staff members. The Kirkpatrick model for evaluating training was applied for the analysis.⁴ The model identifies four levels: overall reaction and/or experience (level 1); gaining new knowledge, skills or confidence (level 2); applying learning (level 3); and outcomes resulting from training (level 4).

Findings

Programme overview

To join the PIJP Programme, a candidate must provide a letter of support from his or her home agency, and the agency must agree to hold a position open for the PIJP's return. When selected, most PIJPs interviewed were employed with government agencies, one with a non-governmental organisation and one was unemployed.⁵

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⁴ Kirkpatrick Partners. 2018. 'The Kirkpatrick Model'. Available online at: <https://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/Our-Philosophy/The-Kirkpatrick-Model>

⁵ This was an exceptional case due to a lack of applicants for one PIJP position.

While specific objectives for the PIJP Programme are not consistently articulated, it seems evident from the review that the programme has a key objective of building capacity in the region, including personal and professional development for participants.

Over the years, the range of areas within FAME where PIJP roles are offered have expanded, from initially just being coastal fisheries science to now including oceanic fisheries and coastal fisheries management and policy.

Recruitment process and logistics

Selection process

The PIJPs interviewed considered the selection process to be ‘competitive’ and ‘fair’, although this is perhaps unsurprising given they were all successful candidates. There was a mixed response with regard to how supportive home agencies were for participants to take up a PIJP position. One past participant commented that their agency ‘did not initially support a one-year posting... but when they saw the benefits [my] immediate boss encouraged it’. Their concern was ‘the workload left behind’. Current PIJPs, however, appear to have been generally encouraged by their workplace. One commented that their government agency was immediately supportive, recognising the PIJP Programme as ‘long-term training’ that was supportive of their agency’s employee development plan.

Arrival in Noumea and settling in

PIJPs appreciated and acknowledged SPC’s efficient organisation of travel arrangements to Noumea, where they were met at the airport and transferred to their accommodation.

The lack of baggage allowance was noted as a challenge for both arrival and return. Concerns were expressed about the limited amount of personal baggage for a one-year posting when ‘only allowed one extra suitcase’ and the extra cost of bringing additional baggage.

PIJPs, especially those recruited earlier, also commented on difficulties in the first few days on arrival, including finding it hard to cope and dealing with homesickness:

It was quite daunting coming to a foreign land and knowing no one.

At the beginning it was difficult... I don’t speak French.

While early PIJPs encountered some difficulties, it is notable that SPC responded to the most pressing issues through improving the ‘arrival experience’ and developing induction and buddy systems for new staff. For current PIJPs who arrived around the same period, the induction process went smoothly because they had a network of support. Despite

coming from different backgrounds, they felt they were living comparable experiences.

All PIJPs interviewed considered the remuneration for the PIJP positions to be adequate, although some felt that not having the same access to benefits as other internationally recruited staff at SPC made some things more difficult and expensive, particularly for those with dependents (e.g. extra costs of bringing and providing for their family, hiring a caretaker for young children).

Participants’ experiences (Kirkpatrick Level 1 – Reaction)

Development and implementation of a work plan

Most of the former PIJPs indicated that their work programme was either set mostly by SPC (rather than developed around the PIJP’s specific learning interests), or was unclear for the first few weeks. In 2018, PIJP managers’ approach in the development and implementation of PIJP work programmes seem to have moved towards a greater balance of what PIJPs wish to learn and what SPC needs. One described it as an ‘organic and ongoing’ process, with meetings being driven by PIJP needs. For another, there was a recurring meeting every two weeks with their supervisor, with plans and priorities continuously being adjusted. Participants who frequently met with their supervisors appreciated the effective guidance and feedback.

Feedback and follow-up is good to know if you’re on the right path and to make sure you’re learning.

Current PIJPs also seem to have had a stronger diversity of tasks and topics included in their work plans than previous participants, although some participants still expressed a desire to have more balance and diversity in their work, with one identifying skills they wished to acquire including strategic planning and leadership.

Work place expectations and field work

Some PIJPs commented on the high expectations at SPC in relation to workload, including the need to multitask and prioritise.

Overall, PIJPs found the fieldwork both challenging (in terms of professional work and the logistics of travel) and rewarding. Some earlier PIJPs felt they had been ‘thrown in the deep end’ in relation to field missions without sufficient preparatory training:

[The role was] ‘to assist’ – but after working with SPC onsite I then went out by myself! But it was a good experience and challenge – I learned a lot.

This sentiment, however, was not shared by current and later PIJPs. One later PIJP stated; ‘I was mentored well on the first trip and the second. For the third trip I did it myself

– even the letter of agreement, this was about four to five months after starting the PIJP term. This was described as a ‘big change and learning process for me’. While earlier recruits noted experiencing some difficulties with ‘lack of guidance and/or advice during initial weeks and months’, this seems to also have improved over time.

Final output of the PIJP posting

PIJPs took considerable satisfaction from being able to author or co-author a written report of their work. For example:

For me to have my name on the report was a big achievement.

I was able to produce all the technical manuals.

By the end [I was] co-author on four country reports.

Participants’ learning (Kirkpatrick Level 2 – Learning)

PIJPs commented positively on their professional learning experience; ‘I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn coastal fisheries science and management at an expert and professional level’.

The opportunity to travel and work in other countries was a highlight for most:

I travelled to Pacific Island countries to see first hand coastal issues and learn how communities and local governance deal with them.

The best aspect? Working with other Pacific Island countries – visit and work with people – see how others approach things; their challenges. Makes a big difference in understanding.

Learning was also not always limited to the work programme; “[SPC] pushed me to other opportunities for learning ... not specific to the project”. One SPC staff member also noted that the programme is not just about technical skills, but ‘also working to build professionals’. They felt that aspects relating to professional behaviour, however, were not always clearly articulated.

Participants’ use of new knowledge and skills (Kirkpatrick Level 3 – Behaviour)

Of the past PIJPs interviewed, all returned to their home organisation after their PIJP term (excluding the participant who was not employed). This was in line with the organisations’ commitments to hold a position open for the returning PIJP, however, PIJPs did not always return to the same role.



Navneel Singh, from Fiji, doing underwater survey work. Image: Pauline Bosserelle, SPC

Several past participants spoke positively about their use of knowledge learned at SPC in their current roles:

My experience has been vital in leading and assisting in conducting trainings, collecting data, doing monitoring and evaluation of data collection.

They really appreciated, acknowledged the skills brought back to the organisation.

For one, implementing a national survey on returning home was the ‘biggest accomplishment of SPC work ... I produced the report directly using what I learned at SPC – organisation, science’. For another, ‘the benefits of working with SPC are huge but I found it somewhat difficult to find work... on my return’.

Programme outcomes (Kirkpatrick Level 4 - Results)

The most positive outcomes seemed to be an increased confidence in the PIJPs’ ability to deliver technical work and to face the challenges presented by working in new environments. On the technical side, the authorship of documents while at SPC was cited by several as key outcomes for example:

Good to learn writing and publications – I am still publishing reports from this learning.

Before I found it hard to write – after SPC I’m more confident; ‘I’ll write that Report’!

I specially learned to be more confident at meetings. Before, I would ask someone to speak for me – now, I’ll take the mic!

With respect to the overall learning experience, one participant summed it up by saying, ‘There are ups and downs, but, you learn things; next time it comes up you know how to deal with the situation.’



Aaranteiti Kiareti, from Kiribati, and Christopher Kalnasei Arthur, from Vanuatu, certainly knew how to make the most of their weekends in Noumea during their one-year participation to the PIJP programme. Images: Siieli Tonga and Michel Blanc, SPC.

SPC staff noted that while PIJP involves some costs, is also directly benefits SPC through:

- making available an extra pair of skilled, capable hands;
- establishing or maintaining country connections; and
- facilitating the standardisation of approaches and methodologies across the region.

Opportunities for improvement

Programme design

1. Clarify the professional development context and objectives

The emphasis on an 'exciting professional development opportunity' in job advertisements led to certain expectations that PIJPs were coming to SPC in a *teaching/learning* environment; instead, they found a more 'learning by doing' environment. SPC needs to more clearly clarify the type of development programme for PIJPs to expect and ensure professional development is formalised in work plans.

2. Broaden the programme so that it is inclusive of mid-career professionals

The term 'junior' may imply that the programme only targets recent graduates or junior staff when, in fact, this does

not represent the group selected for these positions. As such, it is recommended that 'junior' be removed from the position title and possibly changed to, for example, 'Pacific Islander Fisheries Professional'.

3. Continue to broaden the scope for PIJP placements in other areas within FAME

Areas suggested included fisheries economics and monitoring, evaluation and learning.

4. Set the same start date for all PIJPs or have multiple PIJPs at the same time

It was recommended that participants undertake the programme at around the same time so as to provide a network of mutual support. If this is not possible, SPC should consider ensuring multiple PIJPs are at FAME at any the same time.

Individual work plans and learning outcomes

5. Identify clear individual learning outcomes and objectives

The evaluation found that PIJPs' individual objectives, priorities and work plans were not always clear, although this has improved more recently. SPC supervisors should continue to support PIJPs to identify the skills and learning outcomes they would like to work towards during their time at SPC.

6. Develop holistic workplans

Upon arrival, PIJP participants and their supervisors should develop a work plan and prioritise objectives in line with the identified needs of the participant and their supervisor. In developing work plans, PIJPs and SPC staff have noted the importance of considering a holistic work plan that may include multiple technical areas as well as soft skills⁶.

7. Identify learning opportunities at the start

Identify opportunities to fulfil participants' learning and training needs at the start when individual work plans are developed. For example, these could include learning events, training attachments with other agencies, or short courses. A certificate of completion and/or a reference outlining the PIJP's accomplishments at SPC may also be appreciated by PIJPs and a motivation for successful completion.

8. Improve ongoing mentoring and work plan adaptation

SPC should assign the responsibility of supervising PIJPs to staff who are available to provide mentoring and support. Supervising staff could also be further supported in their management of PIJPs, including involvement in the recruitment processes, input into the start date, and any support they may require in developing mentoring and leadership skills themselves. Regular meetings between PIJPs and their supervisor should also take place for feedback, follow-up and adjusting work plans and priorities accordingly.

Logistics for moving to Noumea

9. Formalise a checklist system for moving to Noumea

Arriving in a new country and learning a new language, laws and processes may cause PIJPs to feel lost. A checklist for participants to know what to do on arrival could be beneficial, including administrative procedures for visas, banks and mobile and Internet connectivity. Before sending PIJPs on duty travel it is also important to consider that visas take time and can be difficult or costly to obtain.

10 Compare benefits and/or allowances between PIJPs and other international staff

Factors such as moving costs (e.g. baggage, plane tickets), childcare, and supporting accompanying adults may restrict access for qualified applicants who encounter additional barriers to participation, such as primary carers of children. To ensure equitable opportunities among applicants, SPC should investigate the possibility of including some of these benefits within all PIJP positions.

PIJP alumni

11. Establish an ongoing PIJP network

PIJPs felt they shared a common experience and were positive about the idea of maintaining contact with each other and SPC staff. One suggested the establishment of an online group for PIJPs, noting there may be challenges to managing and maintaining ongoing engagement.

12. Utilise former PIJPs more in FAME's work

It was suggested that SPC could make use of past PIJPs who were trained for short-notice requests or for south-south exchanges.

13. Continued evaluation

FAME should continue to conduct evaluations for continuous improvement and potentially investigating other aspects of the programme such the term length, and including perspectives of fisheries agencies.

Conclusion

The evaluation highlights that the PIJP Programme has been broadly successful, providing a positive experience for PIJPs, building capacity and professional development, and contributing to SPC's work. Of the PIJPs that were interviewed, 10 out of 11 were positive about their experience and felt grateful for the opportunity.

Past participants spoke positively about applying knowledge learned at SPC in their current work. The most positive outcomes of the Programme seemed to be an increased confidence in the PIJPs' ability to deliver technical work and to face the challenges presented by working in new environments.

Understanding all this gives one a sense ... openness to respect and appreciate life in general.

I want to thank SPC for helping me get outside the box. Whatever I will do back home, I will do it with what I learned here.

Most of the early challenges in terms of support provided to PIJPs on arrival and work planning seem to have been addressed as the programme has developed. The current evaluation highlights additional opportunities to continue improving the programme and build on its impact and effectiveness.

⁶ According to the Collins English Dictionary 'soft skills' are defined as 'desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include common sense, the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude'.