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**MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT
IN THE PACIFIC REGION, PARTICULARLY IN BASIC EDUCATION:
A UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC PERSPECTIVE**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The brief presentation I shall make today will focus on the responses of training institutions to HRD challenges in the region. The questions that we have been asked to address are:

- How are training institutions coping or positioning themselves to respond to the HRD challenge in the region?
- How do they ensure the appropriateness of their training programmes or their products to the increasingly diversified needs in the region?

I am going to concentrate basically on the perspectives and perceived roles of the University of the South Pacific in respect to these questions, but I hope that USP's experiences will reflect to some extent the experiences of other institutions in the region.

As I understand it, the focus in this session is not on HRD in general but on 'basic education'. However, I believe that what will be discussed here will also have wider implications for other HRD areas.

The strategies that USP has adopted or intends to pursue both in the long-term and in the near future in response to the HRD challenges in the region, particularly in relation to 'basic education', are based on several assumptions:

- That the definitions of basic education as expressed in the Dakar Framework for Action¹, the Forum Basic Education Plan² and in 'Pacific Education: Where to Now?'³ are endorsed by the region.
- That the main issues and challenges in basic education, as identified in previous analyses⁴, emanated from the countries themselves and are recognised by them as representing their legitimate and priority concerns.

2. BACKGROUND

The University of the South Pacific (USP), as its Mission Statement⁵ makes clear, is one of only two regional universities in the world. It was founded in 1966 and is owned and operated by twelve Pacific Island countries and territories: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

¹ ['Basic education' means] 'not only primary education, but also early childhood education [and secondary education], literacy and life skills programmes. Using both formal and non-formal approaches, it must take account of the needs of the poor and the most disadvantaged, including working children, remote rural [and outer islands] dwellers, and ethnic and linguistic minorities, children, young people and adults affected by conflict, HIV/AIDS, hunger and poor health; and those with special learning needs.

² Basic education as the fundamental building block for society should engender the broader life skills that lead to social cohesion and provide the foundations for vocational callings, higher education and life long learning. These when combined with enhanced employment opportunities create a higher level of personal and societal security and development. Forum countries recognised that development of basic education takes place in the context of commitments to the world community and meeting the new demands of the global economy, which should be balanced with the enhancement of their own distinctive Pacific values, morals, social, political, economic and cultural heritages, and reflect the Pacific's unique geographical context.

³ Basic education is no longer interpreted as formal primary education, which takes place in particular places in particular points of time for specified age groups, and whose main purpose is the development of literacy and numeracy skills. It is seen now not only as life-long but a foundation for life-long learning, provided through a variety of intervention measures and modes of delivery systems, and goes beyond the attainment of numeracy and literacy skills to include essential life-skills, values and knowledge needed by individuals to become fully participating members of their societies. A shift has been made from seeing education as 'schooling' to education as 'life-long learning' and the meeting of basic learning needs and the emphasis from an 'educated' to 'a learning' society.

⁴ (a) Colloquium on Re-Thinking Pacific Education. 2001. 'The Tree of Opportunity: The Way Forward for Pacific Education'. A Brief presented to the Meeting of the Forum Education Ministers in Auckland, May 2001. (b) Forum Basic Education Plan – 2001, Auckland, New Zealand, 15 May 2001. (c) Chung, M. 2000. Pacific Regional Synthesis: Education for All 2000 Assessment. (d) Forum Secretariat. 2001. Background paper on challenges that Pacific Faces in Human Resources Development. Paper prepared for the CROP Human Resource Development Working Group, 8-9 November 2001, Suva, Fiji. (e) USP. Strategic Plan.

⁵ USP. March 1994. Mission Statement. Planning and Development Office, Suva, Fiji. Most of the information in this section is taken directly from this document.

Its Mission, as laid down by the University Charter, is quite clear:

The objects of the University shall be the maintenance, advancement and dissemination of knowledge by teaching and consultancy and research and otherwise, and the provision at appropriate levels of education and training responsive to the well-being and needs of the communities of the South Pacific.

The University recognises the fragmented nature of Pacific Island countries and therefore, national strategies need to be complemented by regional strategies for the most economic use of scarce resources and for member states to relate effectively to the international systems.

3. USP'S COMMITMENTS TO HRD CHALLENGES IN THE REGION

The University of the South Pacific has always been committed, therefore, to providing the governments and the peoples of its member countries with **high quality, internationally recognised, relevant, and cost effective higher education and training, research, publications, consultancy and academic leadership** in the University region. These mean that the University must maintain the highest quality in its teaching and student achievement in both its on campus and Extension courses and must provide quality assistance to national systems in areas which member states cannot address effectively themselves; cooperate as much as possible with national and regional educational and research organisations; maintain and improve links with Universities in both developing and developed countries, especially with those in Oceania; and, continue to promote regional cooperation and collaborations with other regional organisations, as well as international organisations and institutions.

3.1. Focus

Recognising the limitations of human and material resources in the region, the University realistically focuses its attention and efforts on certain key areas, which have been identified by its member states as priority areas. These are:

- sustainable development (in its broadest sense of economic, environmental, social, cultural and political sustainability), with special reference to small island states
- business/management studies
- teacher education (senior secondary)
- Pacific studies
- marine studies
- agriculture and
- science and technology.

3.2. Teaching and Learning

The focus of teaching is at the undergraduate level, with limited postgraduate instruction, which could be expanded, where feasible and in-line with the needs of member states. But, through its Institutes, it also provides in-service training and post-qualifications. It has made a great deal of efforts in recent years to improve the quality of its own teaching and services to students by strengthening the staff and resources of the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT). The University is fully aware that its primary role is to serve its students by ensuring that its programmes are relevant, stimulating and of high quality and that it provides a conducive learning and teaching environment. Thus, through CELT and its other services, it ensures that the needs of students are met.

Similarly, as a major international educational, research and consultancy institution, and to ensure the best service for its member states, the University is committed to recruiting high quality regional staff, while maintaining a significant number of non-regional staff of international standing.

3.3. Open and Flexible Teaching and Learning

To ensure access to and equity in its services, and in recognition of the geographical nature of the Pacific region, the University is an open and flexible learning institution. From the very beginning, it has pioneered distance education but with the establishment of the USPNet, it now has greatly expanded its capacity to provide not only a much increased number of quality programmes through distance education but to offer these through a variety of much improved quality multi-modal delivery systems. USPNet has data capacity for computer network, audio, telephone, video and fax capabilities. For instance, in the video broadcast mode, a combination of up to four simultaneous lecture transmissions are possible from Suva, Alafua and Emalus campuses. However, only two video conferencing are possible at anyone time. The current plans of the University include not only a closer integration of on-campus and distance education but increasing the percentage of the courses to be offered through extension services to at least 50% of all USP courses. Some programmes are to be offered completely through the distance education mode, such as the B.Ed. (Primary).

The greater opportunities to provide education and training flexibly are accompanied by greater efforts by the University to de-centralise its services and concurrently improve the resources, both human and material, of its Centres. It is upgrading the Centres' physical facilities, computer and laboratory facilities, increasing summer schools and face-to-face teaching, and re-locating and appointing new staff to the Centres.

3.4. Consultancies

To provide better policy advice to the region and to decrease its dependence on financial assistance, the University is further enhancing its already extensive consulting activities through better publicity of its capabilities. Consultancies are mainly provided by the University's six Institutes:

- Institute of Applied Sciences
- Institute of Education
- Institute of Marine Studies, Honiara, Solomon Islands
- Institute of Pacific Studies
- Institute for Research, Extension and Training in Agriculture, Apia, Samoa
- Institute of Social and Administrative Studies.

But the School of Agriculture (SOA), Alafua, Samoa, the School of Humanities (SOH), and the School of Pure and Applied Sciences (SPAS) and the School of Social and Economic Development (SSED), departments and sections can also undertake consultancies.

3.5. Research

The University recognises the critical importance of both fundamental and applied research as one of its core functions. It has, therefore, increased its research output and publications, allocated sufficient resources from its own budget to fund essential research, continued its emphasis on research in staff appraisal, and continued to create a greater awareness of the importance of research. The outcomes of such research are, in turn, used to inform and improve its own activities and programmes, and as inputs into its consultancy services and policy advice to member states and regional organizations on HRD matters and issues.

3.5. Developing Partnerships

The University as a regional organisation is committed to cooperation and collaborations with other organisations and institutions and actively maintains its linkages with national, regional and international bodies in a variety of ways. Such partnerships assist the University to maintain its academic leadership in the region and to serve its member states more effectively by keeping them abreast of international trends and helping them to engage with them more meaningfully.

3.6. Resource Management

The University is, of course, fully cognisant of the fact that its member states are facing increasing calls on their resources. It is, therefore, seeking to diversify its sources of funding and to increase its income from endowment funds, consultancies, aid funding and private student fees. At the same time, it is moving, in its own accounting and financial management systems, towards systems that are characterised by efficiency, transparency, flexibility, effective monitoring and supervision, performance-based and rational allocation of resources to meet changing needs and priorities.

4. SPECIFIC RESPONSES TO CHALLENGES IN BASIC EDUCATION

As previously described, the University is already responding in all the areas of its core responsibilities to the identified challenges in basic education: through its teaching and training programmes, research, publications, consultancy services and academic leadership. Some of the specific activities are, however, described briefly below.

3.6. Access and Equity

As previously stated, the University recognises that some of the major challenges in basic education can be best addressed at the national rather than at regional level. These issues include access, equity and resourcing of basic education, both at the formal and non-formal levels. As already demonstrated in previous analyses, access does not refer only to opportunities to participate but also to availability of provisions of resources, facilities and environments that facilitate participation at all levels and to opportunities for employment or meaningful participation in the larger society beyond education and training. Equity similarly means much more than equal opportunities for all groups in any society such as gender, race and class, but to parity of participation and outcomes in education and training and justice and the fairness in the distribution of benefits and rewards in the larger society.

Although the University is of the belief that such issues are best dealt with at the national level as they relate to political commitments, policies and allocation of funds and resources, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes, there are, nevertheless, activities in which it could provide some expertise. They include research into policy options and funding allocations, which could improve access and equity. For example, research could focus on identifying constraints to access and equity, culturally appropriate ways for the developing participatory processes, the most effective, efficient and appropriate delivery systems, etc., the results of which could assist countries to develop new strategies and partnerships with all stakeholders, re-prioritise programmes and activities, reallocate funds, develop alternative methods of delivery, re-organising school time-tables, re-locate institutions, offer new and different curricula, and institute affirmative policies in favour of disadvantaged groups. Dr. Narsey's research into costs of education in Fiji is one such example. He found, for instance, that input has little relation to output and that while the performance of middle-class children at the upper levels of the school system is little influenced by attendance at pre-school level, such attendance, however, makes a significant difference in the performance of children from deprived backgrounds.

The University through its extension services are providing increasing access to Pacific students who are unable to attend courses offered face-to-face in its three main campuses. With the flexible delivery systems offered by the USPNet, the opportunities for Pacific people to access any of the University's courses are much greater and in the process, it is also attempting to address equity issues among its member states.

3.7. Quality

It is, however, in the area of improving quality in basic education that the University has made and is still making significant contributions in a number of areas.

3.7.1. Teacher Education and Training: Pre- and In-service

In addition to the University's established certificate, diploma, degree and post-degree programmes in teacher education for both pre- and in-service primary, secondary and tertiary teachers, and for non-formal educators, which it offers to the region, the University is also providing a number of other services, aimed at improving teacher quality in the region. They include:

- assisting teacher training institutions in the region to upgrade their curriculum per se as well as facilitating their articulation towards USP programmes. At the same time, it is working with such institutions to upgrade the professional and academic qualifications of teacher trainers and educators by providing bridging courses towards post-graduate programmes as well as post-graduate training.
- developing curricula materials for teacher training institutions in the region, especially in contextualising education at the national level, through the UNESCO Chair on Teacher Education.
- coordinating a network of such training institutions and teacher trainers and educators through professional organisations such as the Pacific Association of Teacher Educators (PATE), which assists education professionals to keep abreast of new developments, share experiences and knowledge, consult on common issues and apply common remedies. The Institute of Education, for instance, coordinates the PATE meeting every two years.
- providing in-service training programmes, consultancy and research activities in a wide variety of areas, not only within the BELS project, but in response to specific requests from member countries.
- exploring the possibility of a common registration and accreditation regional board for teachers, which would be responsible for validating teacher qualifications and assist countries to identify desired teacher qualities and competencies and coordinating the establishment of such a board. Its responsibility could include the validation of expertise and status of cultural, vernacular language and indigenous knowledge teachers. It could also assist Ministries in reviewing the conditions of service of teachers, and improving recruitment and retainment of quality teachers.
- Establishing a research centre on Pacific Education based at IOE, which will be linked to all Pacific teacher training institutions and international institutions of common interests, which will also coordinate and promote future research activities in education in the region.

3.7.2. Curriculum Reforms

The University has co-ordinated curriculum development programmes and training in the region since the late sixties. Through the Institute of Education, it has coordinated and administered a number of regional curriculum programmes, the latest being the BELS Project (Basic Education and Life Skills which was later changed to Basic Education and Literacy Support). BELS addressed a number of key areas in basic education: Literacy and Numeracy, School Management and Administration, Community Support, Assessment, Science Education, Vocational and Technical Skills and teacher training. The main thrust of the project were in-servicing teachers in a number of areas, but with particular emphasis on book-based literacy education, assessment and community support for education; early childhood education (curriculum and method); applying a tool to monitor literacy and numeracy achievement (PILL); agricultural curriculum development; and data development and management.

Through the Project, appropriate reading books in English were published and distributed to the region and the service was expanded to include vernacular reading materials. Although the Project has come to an end, it is intended to expand the publications of vernacular reading materials to include most of the major language groups of the Pacific and non-fiction materials suitable for adult literacy training and skills, in areas such as good governance, environmental conservation and management, HIV/AIDS, other health issues, small business management and other priority issues.

With its wealth of experience and networks in this area in the region, gained through consultancies, research, publications and training, the University is certainly best positioned to assist the region in developing relevant and appropriate curricula and in reforming the curriculum.

3.7.3. Assessment and Evaluation

Over the years, the University in collaboration with SPBEA, has provided training, and consultancy services to the region in various aspects of educational assessment and evaluation. Much of it related to the BELS project but other services include the external monitoring of teacher training programmes in the region to ensure that quality is improved.

3.7.4. Data and Information

The University has amassed over the years, through its national activities, a valuable data base of research information. Such information is assisting the University not only to re-orient its own activities but to improve its services to its member states. At the same time, it is establishing a regional database on education, which will assist it to respond more effectively to priority issues in the region.

Maintaining its networks in the region and linkages with national education systems and institutions is essential to providing quality service to the University's member states.

3.7.5. Outreach Programmes

Although issues such as vocational and technical education, skills development, development of information and communication technology are also dealt with under the University's basic education activities, its outreach programmes are the main vehicles for the provision of training and education in life-long skills. They are largely administered and offered through its extension services and implemented either directly by the USP Centres located in countries or through collaborations of the Centres with national providers and organisations. The programmes vary from country to country according to national needs and priorities but they include bridging courses for school push-outs/dropouts, skills training for youth, men and women, and upgrading training for civil servants or other professionals. In most countries, the University also runs sub-centres, which are able to provide limited services to the peoples of the more remote areas and islands.

5. RELEVANCY AND APPROPRIATENESS OF TRAINING

The University, as already stated, is owned by 12 member states. As such it is structured to ensure that it responds appropriately and flexibly to the priority and emerging needs of its member states. Through a number of formal and informal arrangements and mechanisms, the relevancy and appropriateness of its activities and programmes are maximised. The University Council, in which all member states are represented, and its various Committees, are the most important.

But beyond these formal processes and institutions, the University uses other avenues and means for ensuring realistic and effective responses. To develop its Strategic Plan for example, it held strategic seminars at national levels with all with all stakeholders. The information generated was not only useful to the University in mapping out its future direction but it also provided national governments with equally valuable data for planning purposes.

Through the advisory boards of Institutes, Schools and programmes, the University is further provided with sets of different perspectives. The University Centres, which are located in the countries themselves, provide additional information. Its experiences through its consultancy, training and research activities add yet other dimensions. Similarly, its memberships in networks of educational professionals, regional and international organisations and the increasingly large numbers of USP graduates who occupy positions of power in the region all serve to provide reality checks and clarify priorities and needs.

The fact that the University is today linked through its USPNet service to individuals, member states, regional bodies, and international organisations in a variety of ways means that communication is almost instantaneous and 'borderless'. But the challenge for the University lies not in the speed of its response, but in its ability to develop from the diverse and fragmented information and data available a coherent response to Pacific educational challenges that is meaningful in the contexts of each member state.

6. ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS TO EDUCATION REFORMS AND DEVELOPMENT

From the previous descriptions and discussions, it would appear that the University, as the South Pacific's premier higher education institution, since its establishment, has responded flexibly, appropriately and effectively to the changing and increasingly diversified HRD demands in the region. It has achieved this by through continuing dialogue with its member states and other stakeholders, debate and reflective action; through comprehensive consultative and participatory processes and in constantly upgrading the quality of its performance in its core areas of responsibilities: the maintenance, advancement, dissemination of knowledge through its teaching, researching, consulting, and publications and ensuring that it is providing appropriate levels of education and training for the needs of the region.

However, the fact that educational development in the region has not succeeded in effectively addressing the challenges that Pacific countries have been grappling with for the last thirty years or so calls for a critical re-examination not only of the functions of educational and training institutions but of education itself and its purposes, particularly in relation to the 'well-being' of Pacific communities, as specified by the University's Mission statement.

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If the ultimate goal of educational development, and development for that matter, is the 'well-being' of Pacific peoples and communities, what does it mean? I would argue that 'well-being' refers to the health of the whole person, which include his/her community and encompasses his/her physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health; the health of their relationships with each other and others, including their relationships with their environments and the health of those environments, as conceived in their broadest terms, that sustain them.

The question that we need to ask ourselves is whether our education systems, as they are presently constituted, and our educational and training institutions are promoting the total 'health' of the individuals in those societies as well as the health of those societies?

We are here today to examine possible effective responses to the challenges in basic education in the region. However, it is my belief and that of many of my colleagues, that the challenges we are focusing on today and which have drawn the attention of Pacific Leaders, Economic and Education Ministers, have not changed in the last thirty years. They are still about quality, access, equity, relevance, effectiveness and efficiency, to name some, which are, in turn, related to other issues, such as lack of effective leadership and management; political commitment; adequate human and material resources; planning capacity; adequate data, information and research; quality teachers; relevant and appropriate curriculum; and appropriate language policies. The results, for example, include continuing poor performances in literacy and numeracy, which are the bases of life-long learning in our modern world. It is noted, however, that these variables are insufficient in themselves to account for the continuing high push-out/failure rate of Pacific students in formal schooling at all levels, not only in the region, but also in metropolitan countries, such as New Zealand and Australia, where the quality of the inputs is much higher. With the inability of systems to meet the demands for basic education and with rising population growths, access continues to be a major issue, but at the same time there is the concomitant concern over quality as demonstrated by the high wastage in the system, manifested in high dropouts/push-outs and repeater rates and continuing literacy and numeracy under-achievements.

The questions that have occupied my own thinking for many years as well as those of many of my Pacific colleagues all relate to the relationship between the education system and the 'well-being' of Pacific peoples. What are the effects on the 'well-being', that is, on their health, of Pacific peoples of an education system, which has from the very beginning, systematically ignores, devalues, and marginalises the values, beliefs and knowledge systems of Pacific peoples and their communities? What are the effects of a system that concentrates its efforts only on developing some dimensions of the human being and ignores the rest? What are the effects of such a system on the development of societies? What kinds of human beings and societies does it generate? What is the outcome of a development paradigm that focuses only on improving 'living standards', which refers only to the 'material' benefits of people, instead of the holistic transformation of human beings and through them their societies?

Is it possible to re-conceptualise development and education to achieve the total well-being of individuals and societies? Can we develop a paradigm that recognises the existing values, knowledge and skills of Pacific people and from that base develop the confidence and self-esteem needed for sustainable and transformative education and development? Can we successfully integrate informal, non-formal and formal education into a seamless process that develops 'whole' human beings and balanced, harmonious and cohesive societies, where different values, skills and knowledge are equally cherished and encouraged? Can we capitalise on the Pacific's rich cultural traditions, and oral literature and history, to promote the achievement of educational goals in the formal system, such as literacy, numeracy and other life-skills and knowledge that are required for sustainable development and effective participation in our global community?

These are just some of the difficult questions that we all must grapple with and find solutions to. The roles of educational institutions, particularly those purporting to provide academic leadership in the region, must include critical analyses and reflections on their own processes, practices and performance and the values and assumptions that underpin them. They must be able to provide Pacific peoples and their communities, however, much more than just realistic options and signposts. They have a responsibility to create a new heaven on earth.

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