

ABSTRACT

Vocational/Occupational Training in Pacific Island Nations: Some Problems and Recommendations

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The paper is based on surveys done to establish the cause of manpower problems in the Pacific region together with the author's personal observations over nine years while working in the region. It is often assumed that the problems lie in the improvements and/or extension of vocational occupational education. This is partially true because there is evidence to suggest current shortage of skilled manpower is a result of government priorities (in educational spending), emigration of skilled workers, inefficient use of trained personnel, inadequate rewards offered to recruit and retain highly skilled teachers of vocational/occupational subjects at post secondary level.

The diverse background and the level of industrialisation among the Pacific Island Nations, present a wide range of problems. As a result, the paper will address some general issues first and then present, country by country, issues pertaining to vocational/ occupational education and training.

1. INTRODUCTION

While the countries of the South Pacific have some common characteristics, they are significantly different from each other in many respects. They have different forms of government therefore different decision making processes; their people speak different languages, have different socio-cultural background, different in assessing economic values and therefore have different levels of economic development and industrialization. These differences have a significant impact on the educational aspiration of the Pacific Island Nations (PIN).

Most vocational/occupational training programmes have been established through foreign aid as funds became available. So very often it is not the manpower need that determines which programme is developed but the availability of aid. Jackson (1984) reported that PIN receives the most aid per capita in the world. However this is very unevenly distributed among the PIN members. Although most PIN members can get aid readily there is some discomfort regarding the effect of aid on their sovereignty and independence. This scepticism regarding the motives of aid agencies has fostered the strengthening of regional corporation in training and development.

2.0 GENERAL FINDINGS

Planning and Management

Because of the many differences among the Pacific Island Nations (PIN) the vocational/occupational education also varies from well established in some countries to just beginning in others. These differences are also related to the lack of necessary data and personnel to effectively plan middle level manpower training in individual countries. Although facilities to train at all levels are available within the region if not in individual countries, there is a serious lack of planning and coordination. Perhaps the establishment of a Regional Center for Vocational and Occupational Education (RCVOE) with representation from every PIN country may help coordinate the training needs of individual PIN countries and the region and, keep it in tune with developments in industry. It would also assist in combining resources, avoiding duplication and consequently optimise training opportunities. Over the last decade, with no economic rationalisation, there has been a sudden desire of PIN countries to have new national tertiary education institutes when, in some cases, the existing tertiary programmes and secondary schools need consolidating.

While there are 35 tertiary institutions throughout the region there is little if any consultation among them. Consequently, in many cases, duplication of programmes can be found. The small numbers needed by individual countries does not provide economic justification for such operations. Allied to this is the serious concern regarding the suitability of courses, equipment resources to teach at required levels and the question of qualified staff, preferably locals, to provide the continuity of the training programmes

Course Standards and Staffing Crisis

Of all the PIN countries, Fiji appears to have adequate facilities for most specialisation areas and at most levels. The national institutions together with University of the South Pacific can cater for the whole range of training required by Fiji. Also prior to the 1987 coup Fiji seemed to have sufficient local personnel to teach and administer the necessary programmes. However, since 1987 there has been a gradual erosion of skilled personnel and deterioration in equipment and course standards. FIT's (Fiji Institute of Technology) expatriate staff percentage has increased to 36% and, of those locals still at FIT 60% have qualification at the same level as the courses they are teaching (World Bank Report, 1992). The decline in standard was noticed by the government and as a result in 1991 Fiji government commissioned a group of British Consultants to conduct a feasibility study to revamp FIT and raise its profile to a Polytechnic Status. This obviously has generated a lot of enthusiasm among the industrial sector, both private and government. But it is too early to comment on the curricula offered by the revamped FIT and its impact on general manpower training. However, it must be noted that till 1987 FIT enjoyed a very good reputation in training tradesmen and technician for the Pacific region. The shortage of trained staff is a phenomena through out the region, and it has been high lighted by the recent World Bank report; with Solomon Island College of Higher Education (SICHE) topping the list in employing expatriates (46%) and Western Samoa Technical Institute (WSTI) having the largest percentage of instructor with qualifications at the same level as the courses they teach (52%). In the absence of any regional creditation or moderation mechanism the standards are institution bound and vary greatly.

Organisation Structure

Most Pacific Island countries have some form of manpower training or apprentice training board ie., an organisational structure put in place which can be further developed to cover areas of deficiency. However, these training boards are controlled by the governments and have very narrow objectives

therefore, the earlier suggestion of establishing RCVOE; with some degree of autonomy, perhaps, could coordinate government and non-government organisations engaged in vocational /occupational training and, progressively conduct independent manpower needs and adjust training programmes accordingly. The current system is tied to government plans which are reviewed only after every five years, by than the job market would have changed considerably. For example, most apprentice boards concentrate on traditional trades like metalwork and construction. But the current needs of many PIN members have now expanded to new areas like printing, catering and other tourism related skills. The activities of these training boards need to be reviewed periodically so as to keep abreast with the changes affecting the job market.

The ever increasing and unpredictable migration pattern fostered by high paying job opportunities and easy entry into countries like NZ and Australia has made manpower forecasting in some countries difficult. Therefore, it may be useful if the government and the private sector could build a "pool of available skilled workers" for emergency. Furthermore every PIN member should develop a small team of experts in vocational/occupational education to manage and teach in each country. It is necessary to avoid over-dependence on outside aid for training of semi-skilled and skilled workers.

Unemployed Youth

As elsewhere in the world, providing for the growing youth population is a concern among Pacific Island Nations. The 1992 World Bank Report, reported that bulk of the youth population do not make it to tertiary institutions consequently, the government manpower planning section should formulate strategies to make them productive. Providing the youth with skills to work and support themselves is considered a priority- at least in principle. The limited jobs in the cash economy sector of the PIN reinforce the need for vocational/self-employed skills to improve the living standard of its people. While every PIN member acknowledges this need, many lack necessary financial, human, and equipment resources to do anything about it. There are institutions and organisations in almost every country addressing the youth training problem but they all seem to heading at tangents with each other.

Training Priority

The current emphasis in most PIN countries is on human resource development at the highly skilled level (it is very obvious in Tuvalu). This means engaging in courses involving extended periods of time. This policy is largely in response to localising positions held by expatriates. Expatriates recruited to fill in posts in the PIN were often over qualified, ie.,

supervisory positions were held by qualified technologist. This left a legacy that the local replacements has to be a technologist as well. But a review of the work procedures and workload of technologist in PIN suggest that one technologist could coordinate a number of projects within a department. Provided, there is sufficient qualified and capable middle level personnel to take over the supervisory role. In many cases there was a gap in the manpower at this (technician) level. From discussions with people engaged at the technologist level, it was revealed that 50% of there time was spent working at technician level ie., managing and coordinating the work of the trades people. The lack of qualified local people affects the continuity of many training programmes in PIN. The large gap at the middle level occupations was also identified by the recent World Bank Report on post-secondary education in the PIN. For example, in Tonga, out of a total of 27 staff employed at the curriculum development unit there are 7 Senior officers, 14 assistant senior officers and only one clerk typist. This type of anomaly is found in most PIN countries.

Regional Corporation

There was a re-occurring issue in the country by country discussions, of regional cooperations. Over the last 20 years there has been an attempt to develop a regional consciousness among the pacific islanders but because of the conflicting needs it has been very slow and difficult. Todate, only five regional organisation can claim some degree of success. While they all welcomed the idea there appeared to be some apprehension to the hidden objectives of regional projects. the smaller countries felt that they were not getting an equal share of the benefits form regional projects. It was suggested by disadvantaged countries that future regional projects should be located in the smaller countries. Considering the smallness of some of the PIN the nett advantage from regional corporation should out weigh its disadvantage. Perhaps, the PIN's Regionalism could learn from the successful Commonwealth of the Carriibbean model.

2.1 SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Regional Coordinating Center

Most studies found that there seem to be an urgent need to set up a regional center to monitor and strengthen vocational /occupational education in the region. It should have a short term (annual) plan and a long term plan which should to be reviewed every five years. In consultation with the PIN governments and institutions the Center will act as a clearing house for all matters such as course content and availability of courses. Strengthen teaching and learning by evaluating institutions, setting standards by appointing moderators,

accrediting awards, developing cross crediting, assist in developing curricula and teaching resources and identify areas and arrange for staff development.

The agency could also be seen as a means to facilitate cooperation, consultation and rationalisation within the region between governments and aid agencies. It could also facilitate rationalisation among institutions by identifying institutions that could provide specific levels of training and give equal access to all PIN countries. Institutions with advanced equipment could be conducting advanced level training. There is a need to develop a network of human resource and increase dialogue at professional levels since it is the level which can harmonise programmes.

Strengthening Teaching and Learning

In order to achieve high standards in training it is essential to recruit the best possible instructors. This means that the conditions of employment and the reward structure has to be attractive enough to compete with, the private sector and the temptation of migrating to more developed countries.

Instructors need to be proficient in their respective trades by having extended experience in using those skills to a high standard. A good tradesman does not always make a good instructor therefore, instructors need to be trained as tertiary instructors. Opportunity to continue upgrading their skills through short courses and attachments to similar organisation within and outside the region (Pacific rim countries) must be encouraged. Consideration should be given to joint staff development programmes with appropriate agencies such as Colombo Plan Staff College. Exchange of staff, course materials, library resources etc, among the regional institution should be encouraged. Qualification for instructors at non-government organisations should also be similar to government agencies engaged in vocational /occupational training. There is a need to certificate the current teachers of vocational/occupational education. Perhaps USP might consider a diploma level programme for both pre service and inservice students.

The lack of coherence and coordination in training, funded by the various aid agencies should be reduced. It is recommended that the aid agencies consult the proposed Regional Center for Vocational/Occupational Education when providing training scholarships. Individual countries need to develop a long term plan for staff development.

Although most institutions have adequate equipment attempts must be made to continuously upgrade and maintain them. This will make

training reflect the required skills in industry.

Training Priority

The gap at the middle level manpower is due to PIN governments' training priorities. The solution is to reduce emphasis on training engineers and doctors and redirect those resources into training more technicians and middle level staff ie, medical assistants and associate engineers. At a lower cost and shorter training times, sufficient personnel to coordinate most of the activities within a department can be obtained. This will also free the engineers and doctors to perform their real function. Governments should have a short term and a long term training programme with an option of periodic reviews. This will eliminate the "Tonga curriculum development unit situations". Advice aid agencies on the current manpower demands so that the scholarships are better utilised.

Community Training Centers

Unemployed youth, if not made productive can become a major burden on the state. The success of the community training center in Tuvalu suggest that there may be potential in exploiting the concept in other PIN countries. A study should be conducted to assess its viability in other PIN countries. Since the youth problem is becoming a real issue government and aid agencies need to consider it in their planning and budget allocations.

3.0 COUNTRY BY COUNTRY REPORT

The following section hopes to put the status of vocational/occupational education in eleven PIN countries in perspective. An understanding of the geographic size and economic development of these countries is essential to fully appreciate the problems.

3.1 Cook Islands

Background

The population of Cook Islands is 17,900 and a land area of 240sq. km. A large percentage of Cook Islanders live in New Zealand. The economy is relatively developed with about half of the working population engaged in commerce, transport and service industries. Some 30% are engaged in agriculture and a very small percentage in manufacturing.

Existing Resources

Cook Islanders are New Zealand citizens with full access to NZ education facilities, this has discouraged the development of any formal training within the country. A primary/junior secondary teacher training center exists but operates only when

need arises (when attrition through migration, retirement, resignation etc, starts to impinge on the operation of the schools).

A national apprentice training council is set up which in collaboration with ILO used to conduct trade tests. With the withdrawal of ILO the center has closed down. However, the employees are supportive of trade tests and meet expenses for attending block releases in NZ technical institutes.

Needs Identified and Recommendation

Although Cook Islanders have full accesses to NZ tertiary education facilities only those qualified and accepted for apprenticeship have the opportunity. This excludes majority of the youth population. Therefore, it is suggested that consideration be given to include vocational/occupational education option in the school programme. School curriculum should have a balance between academic and vocational subjects. Youths from outer islands need training in boat and outboard motor maintenances to facilitate their fishing; training in subsistence agriculture may reduce dependency on imported food. The success of community training centers in other PIN countries suggests that it may be an option.

3.2 KIRIBATI

Background

Kiribati has a population of 63,000 and a land area of 690 sq.km spread over 3,550,000 sq km of sea. The only mineral resource, phosphate is now exhausted and the main revenue earner is copra. The subsistence sector involves fishing, coconut and cash crop farming. The government hopes to achieve economic self sufficiency through planned development of its fishing industry.

The government is the major employer as there is very little private sector development. The government hopes to equip the countries manpower to take employment within and outside Kiribati.

Existing Resources

Each year about 1000 students leave school with different levels of schooling. They return to subsistence agriculture and fishing as their major source of income. Kiribati has the necessary training institutions to train all its middle manpower needs. The apprentice board organises through Tarawa Technical institute, to train skilled workers required by government agencies. The Marine training school provides training opportunity for junior secondary school leavers for rating jobs on foreign going ships.

There are some basic vocational subjects in class 8 and 9. The government is also considering setting craft training centers in the outer islands. This will only eventuate if foreign aid is made available.

Needs Identified and Recommendation

Despite having adequate facilities there is a serious shortage of trained local staff at both Tarawa and Marine training institutes. The services of expatriate will be needed for some time to come. There is an urgent need of a coordinating body to look exclusively at manpower training needs. Set up a system to utilise government officers with necessary qualification, in training either inhouse or at technical institutes.

Although the government seems to have a plan for manpower training, lack of funds prevent the implementation. There is a need to establish craft centers in the outer islands, extending vocational subject in school system and widening the role of Tarawa Technical institute. The USP center should be involved in training in management and commerce.

3.3 NAURU

Background

Nauru has a population of about 6000 with a very small land area, most of which is being or has been mined for phosphate. Its economy is based on phosphate mining and currently considered as having one of the worlds highest per capita incomes. The country is very heavily dependent on expatriate work force at all levels and sectors.

Existing Resources

Nauru has a Trade School which has adequate facilities to cater for most trade training in automotive, electrical and construction areas. Most government departments and the mining company provide on-job training. Because of lack of manpower planning, training is very haphazard and short sighted. There is no provision, within the country for training in management and business. There is a lack of continuity in many educational programmes because of the heavy reliance on transient expatriate staff.

Needs Identified and Recommendation

The presence of many expatriate technical and vocational teachers emphasise the need for Naruans to take over teaching responsibilities at both secondary and tertiary levels. There is a need to complement training at the Trade school with on-job training (something similar to block release programme in the apprenticeship scheme). The equipment in vocational

training centers, at secondary school and tertiary level are obsolete or broken thus need urgent upgrading.

The shipping line, fishing fleet and the airline all have potential for on-job-training in respective areas. This has not been considered seriously. A very small percentage of Naruans are employed in these areas.

3.4 NIUE

Background

Niue has a population of 2800 and a land area of 259 sq. km. It has a negative population growth because Niueans have New Zealand citizenship thus have free access to NZ education facilities (there is an ever increasing Niuean population in NZ). There is very little economic development in the country. Most of the land is unsuitable for cultivation. The government is the major employer.

Existing Resources

There is some on-job training done by government departments. The USP extension center enables students to enrol in extension courses. With the open access to NZ, Niue is much better off than many other PIN with regard to Education and training.

Needs Identified and Recommendation

An agency to coordinate the vocational/occupational training will be useful. Considering the small number of people required for each skill Distance Education may be the most sensible way to provide training opportunities within the country.

3.5 TOKELAU

Background

Tokelau is administered by New Zealand and has a population of 1600, the smallest land area of 10sq km. The administrative head office is based in Apia, Western Samoa.

Needs Identified and Recommendation

Since Tokelauans have New Zealand citizenship their education and training needs are being met by New Zealand. In fact more Tokelauans live in New Zealand than in Tokelau.

3.6 TONGA

Background

The kingdom of Tonga has 169 islands of which only 36 are inhabited. These islands are spread over 360,000 sq.km of sea. It has an agriculture based economy, making up 90% of export. Most government department and training facilities are

concentrated on the main island of Tongatapu.

Existing Resources

The current vocational training facilities are inadequate to locally produce all skilled manpower for middle level technical occupations. Most training is on-the-job training done by employers. The 1984 manpower survey pointed out that in the next 10 years there need to be an increase in architects, engineers, accountants and most trades. As a result of the manpower survey priority is given to high level training at graduate and post graduate levels using up most education aid thus creating a gap at the middle level.

Needs Identified and Recommendation

A National Training board should be established which can coordinate the various technical /vocational training, act as a clearing house, link with aid agencies and other national and regional department/institution.

Urgent consideration must be given to recruiting and training local staff. Also the reward structure should be attractive enough to retain the staff. Selection criteria for training also need to be looked at; often under qualified people are sent on training who are unsuccessful and wasteful.

More vocational subjects in agriculture, engineering trade and construction studies should be included in the school curriculum.

3.7 SOLOMON ISLANDS

Background

Solomons has a population of 226,000 and a land area of 28,530 sq.km. It has an agricultural economy exporting copra, palm oil and timber as well commercially fishing its vast sea area. It has a very low literacy rate; only 40% of all school age children attend primary school and about 8% complete the eleven years of schooling system.

Existing Resources

There is an urgent need for an agency to coordinate vocational/occupational training. Adequate facilities for all school age students is not available as a result a large percentage never attend school. The government has failed to provide any alternative training programme such as community skills training centers.

Recent consolidation of the Solomon College of Higher Education provide a firm foundation for vocational/occupational education. However, courses in some department need to be

upgraded. Also some departments like the Industrial Development are under utilised. It was noted that there is a heavy reliance on expatriate staff to conduct lectures and administer.

Needs Identified and Recommendation

The number and quality of students completing schooling need to be increased so that available places in tertiary schools are effectively utilised. There is a serious shortage of qualified locals to administer and teach in secondary and tertiary institutions. Govt should consider this as a priority.

A large percentage of children who have no schooling are mostly unemployed. Perhaps the education planners need to explore the concept of community training centers which can equip these children with relevant skills (in cash crop farming, fishing, livestock farming etc.) for fruitful community life.

School programmes should include vocational subjects and emphasise skills that will be most relevant after they leave. Like most other PIN there is an urgent need to establish a manpower training committee.

3.8 TUVALU

Background

Tuvalu has a land area of 26 sq.km with a population of approximately 9000. It has the highest population density in the region. The economy is based on subsistence farming and fishing. Specialised manpower needs are small as a result the policy of select and train overseas as and when need arises. Most tertiary training is undertaken at USP or FIT.

Existing Resources

Attendance is compulsory in primary and community training centers (for students who have failed to obtain places in secondary school). The only post secondary training is provided by the Maritime training center. It provides training related to shipping industry (deck hands, engine room personnel, steward specialties.) The community training centers are very successful in providing basic skills for rural life and /or enhance employment in cash economy sector.

Needs Identified and Recommendations.

Community training center staff need specialised skills as such trained tradesmen and technicians. The available trained personnel in private and public sectors are often under utilised, perhaps they could take up some of the responsibility of conducting the training.

There seems to be an anomaly in the manpower planning, normally, for every one technologist here should be 4 support staff but in Tuvalu it is the reverse. Community training center should widen the offerings and move into appropriate technology, outboard motor maintenance.

3.9 WESTERN SAMOA

Background

Western Samoa has a population of 165,000 with a land area of 2935 sq km. Samoa has a very young population; 50% of the population is under 15 years of age. Largely an agricultural based economy with a small but growing manufacturing sector. Although the literacy rate is high 80% of school leavers return to their villages ill-prepared for productive work.

Existing Resources

The country has a sound organisational structure for vocational/occupational training. It has a good apprenticeship scheme. Government department and private sector are also involved in, in house training. There is also a sector of non-government organisation (church) engaged in vocational training.

Needs Identified and Recommendation

The WSTI is playing a pivotal role in vocational training . However, it needs some urgent upgrading of equipment and programmes. It should also consider expanding so that more students can benefit. Advanced level programmes should also be a consideration. The institute should diversify its offering into hotel and catering, tourism, agriculture etc. There has to be a long term plan for the institute and an commitment from the government to implement the plan. Lack of trained local staff is a region wide problem and WSTI is no exception. It is vital for the development of the institute that stall development be a priority and furthermore the reward structure for the staff has to attractive enough to retain them.

Consideration should be given to establishing more YMCA community training center to better serve the unemployed youth in villages.

3.10 VANUATU

Background

Vanuatu has a population of 124,000 and a land area of 11,880 sq km. The countries economy is dependent on agriculture and fishing but recently tourism has made a strong impact.

Existing Resources

The education system in Vanuatu is unique. After independence there has been two very different systems. There is the French schools where the medium of instruction is French and the Anglophone school where everything is taught in English. The government is slowly trying to bring both systems under one control. There are adequate post secondary training facilities although some planning and upgrading of equipment is necessary.

Needs Identified and Recommendations

The Programmes offered at the National Training Institute need to be in both languages and the range and depth of courses should extend beyond the current pre employment needs.

The school of nursing have adequate programmes but could do with few more equipment. There seem to be some local politics between the Government Training Center and the Marine School. There is a reluctance to pool both resources and provide good programmes. Individually the two institution will serve little purpose.

The vocational training centers are a good concept but once again dependence on expatriate staff affects its operation and standards (an excellent example is St Michele Tech School which is temporarily shut because all staff expatriate staff decided to leave.

3.11 FIJI ISLANDS

Background

Has over 300 islands varying in size from 10,000 sq.km to small islets. It has an agricultural based economy with some mining and a rapidly growing manufacturing sector. Tourism development is recent but has grown to be one of the major foreign exchange earner. It has lot more international activities such as air and shipping links and acting as a base for many overseas companies.

Existing Resources

Education system, although not adequate, has made remarkable progress in providing technical/occupational background to a large percentage of the school age population. It has a multitude of post secondary educational institute offering a variety of courses at different levels to cater for manpower needs of Fiji as well as the neighboring countries.

USP provides training for manpower requirements at middle and higher levels. FIT with its various schools conduct a range of courses (from 1 week to 4 years) for semi-skilled middle level

occupations. The FNTC organises and conducts short term training in response to employees need to upgrade skills. The Telecommunication Training Center and the Fiji College of Agriculture are contributing to training personnel in telecommunication and agriculture respectively.

The general impression is that Fiji has the necessary vocational/occupational training resources to meet all its training needs.

Needs Identified and Recommendation

Staff development and training is critical in most training institution, it may be more obvious at FIT (see world Bank Report. There selection of staff training should also be reviewed as it is frustrating many staff members. The reward structure has to be competitive with private sector in order to reduce attrition. Immigration in search of better rewards is also affecting the staffing situation. Obsolete equipment needs to be replaced so that training is in par with developments in industry. Library facilities are very poor at most training institution and organisations.

Decentralising facilities should be considered. If not additional hostel accommodation needs to be planned for future demands.

Because of the large number of institution engaged in vocational/occupational training some central coordinating agency needs to be established. This committee could monitor standards, cross-credits, examinations and certification.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The survey reports concur with my observations that there are number of areas that need attention and two in particular. Firstly, lack of coordination of vocational/occupational training activities is seriously lacking. PIN governments should develop a consistent long term policy for vocational/occupational education in accordance with the national development plan. Furthermore , it should, as a matter of urgency, establish a national center which would bring together government and non government agencies engaged in Vocational/Occupational education so that effective programmes and rationalising of the resources may be developed. Through RCVOE the national centers should foster collaboration between regional institutions, monitor standard and exchange resources.

Secondly, the area of teaching and learning need urgent attention. The quality of courses, levels of courses, has to match the resources. Often, newly qualified technicians do not

have exposure to current equipment and consequently face difficulties in performing the duties. Teaching resources need to be upgraded and exchange of resources among institutions be encouraged. Staff training needs to be carefully planned for short term and long term development of the institution. This should be a regional priority, considering the state of the staffing problem in most regional institutions.

There is a need for region-wide stratification of training institutions based on the level of courses it can offer. This will eliminate duplication and involve most PIN in providing training at some level as suited to their resources.

Development of community training centers should be evaluated and more marketable skills introduced. Furthermore, it should be expanded to provide for the increasing demand. The education planners of PIN should give appropriate recognition to practical /vocational subjects in primary and secondary schools.

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