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The Fiji Education Support Program (FESP) Project: An Evaluation of the First Executive Tour of W.A.

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Abstract:

As a part of the Fiji Education Support Program, (FESP) an initiative of AusAid managed by ACIL and jointly implemented by the Department of Education and Training, Western Australia, (DETTWA) and Curtin University of Technology, (CUT) a group of nine senior executives, including the CEO from the Ministry of Education in Fiji, and representatives from Lautoka teachers College, undertook a study tour of the Western Australian education system. The aim of the tour was for participants to develop an understanding of the Primary, Secondary and TAFE sector in WA, to form partnerships, strengthen leadership and to build the capacity to reform policy and strategic direction for improving education and the delivery of education in their own country. This study is an evaluation of the tour, the perceptions of participants and the conclusions they reached for prioritising policy in their own country as a result of their experiences.

Introduction

Building capacity to reform an educational system is primarily considered to be the need for improving teacher knowledge and skills (Massell, 1998). Although this is important, capacity building also requires the context of the environment to be taken into consideration, where educational direction and leadership and access to resources and knowledge are also acknowledged as key components of any reform (Goertz, Floden & O'Day, 1995). To this end the strategies chosen by the managing body of the Fijian Education Support Program, ACIL, in conjunction with its partners Curtin University of Technology and the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia to build the capacity of the Fijian Ministry of Education in the delivery of its educational services incorporated:

A judicious mix of activities/interventions...comprising initiatives aimed at strengthening the strategic sections within senior levels of the MoE to enhance planning and management together with activities delivered in rural, disadvantaged areas, to improve service delivery through enhanced school leadership and pilot projects in curriculum reform and enterprise education (p3)

The program aimed to assist in the implementation of reforms to improve educational services in Fiji, with the purpose of enhancing the quality of education for students by providing mechanisms to improve planning, management and the provision and monitoring of educational services. Furthermore the program aimed for sustainability of the reforms where sustainability is “the continuation of benefits after major assistance has been completed (AusGUIDE, 2003).

An agreement was derived as a result of the Education Commission Report (2000), between the Government of Fiji and the Government of Australia on two primary objectives;

- To identify areas for support which could assist in the achievement of education and training sector policies and objectives
- To propose specific activities, including feasibility and design/scoping work, which should be undertaken to underpin an assistance program and prepare draft terms of reference where applicable.

The Fiji Islands Education Commission Report (2000) developed a list of 25 objectives that provided procedural information guidelines, policy objectives and regulations underpinning legislation for the revision of education. From this grew the strategic program designed to improve the delivery and quality of educational services with an emphasis on three main areas

- Building leadership and management capacity
- Building planning capacity
- Improving curriculum relevance and flexibility.

The Western Australian Department of Education and Training and Curtin University of Technology combined resources to facilitate the first of these priorities.

Background

Fiji has a population of 775,077 comprising 50.8% Fijians, 43.7% Indo-Fijians and 5.5% other ethnic groups (1996 Census) spread over an archipelago of 100 islands. The population of Fiji is spread over a wide geographical area, much like W.A., which poses similar challenges to the efficient delivery of educational services. There are 854 primary and secondary schools, 45 Technical and Vocational Training centres staffed by over 9,000 teachers, with 208,848 students (2001 MoE Annual Report). The education budget for Fiji in 2002 was \$217,361,100 or 17.3% of the total national budget.

A consultancy was created with relation to the area of building leadership and management capacity, that aimed to “enhance the leadership and management capacity of staff at the senior management level of the Fijian Ministry of Education to embrace contemporary education policy, management and service delivery in their respective roles and areas of responsibility.”

This meant that a number of senior officers were recruited to “meet with their Western Australian counterparts for briefings on issues of importance to assist them in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities” A study program for a two week tour was developed and approved. Nine senior Fijian Ministry of Education executives travelled to Western Australian for a tour of educational facilities in a fact finding capacity to develop strategic partnerships, develop leadership skills and decide on direction for the creation of policy in Fiji. The tour commenced February 29th, 2004 and concluded March 13th, 2004. Participants included the Chief Executive Officer, The Deputy Secretary for Education (Professional), the Director of Technical Vocational Education and Training, The Director of Secondary Schools, a District Director, the Co-ordinator for the Economic Union program, a Senior Education

Officer in the School Broadcasting Unit, the Principal of Lautoka Teachers College, and a Senior lecturer at Lautoka Teachers College.

Methodology

This research is interpretive in nature and was based on a mixed method approach that involved the use of a questionnaire, which utilised both open and closed questions to gauge the perceptions of participants, as well as several focus group discussions during the two-week study tour. Interpretative research focuses on a specific social setting or phenomena. As noted by Erickson (1986) and by others such as Patton (1990) and Denzin & Lincoln (1994), within the interpretive approach, there are many methods. However, they all share the same philosophical assumption, that reality is constructed by individuals interacting within their social worlds (Merriam, 1998).

An evaluation instrument (questionnaire) comprising 31 questions, using a five point Likert scale was administered to participants during the course of the tour. The instrument gave participants a choice of five responses regarding their perceptions of each of their experiences: 1.very high quality experience, 2.high quality experience, 3.neutral experience, 4.low quality experience, and 5.poor quality experience. Participants were also encouraged to elaborate on their experiences by responding to open-ended questions, describing the relevance, value and quality of various activities and presentations with reference to the presenters and the content of presentations or activities. The mixed method nature of the instrument allowed for the collection of a quantitative data for analysis through the use of descriptive statistics and a qualitative collection of data which was examined using content analysis.

The Tour

Activity	Description	Likert Response
1.Presentation	Presentation consisted of Curriculum Director in collaboration with curriculum area managers of VET, ICT, Curriculum Improvement, and Post Compulsory Education.	1. 75% 2. 25%
2.Presentation	An overview of education in W.A. presented by Deputy Director General of DETWA	1. 62.5% 2. 37.5%
3.Presentation	Human Resource Management, entitled <i>Valuing Curtin Staff Plan</i> presented by the Pro Vice Chancellor	1.100%
4. Tour of facilities and presentation	Applecross SHS with an exploration of the specialist visual Arts program	1. 87.5% 2. 12.5%
5. Tour of facilities and presentation	John Curtin School of the Arts-an exploration of the specialist performing arts program	1. 87.5% 2.12.5%
6. Tour of facilities and presentation	A tour of Challenger TAFE Vocational Education and Training facilities, in the Aquaculture program	1. 62.5% 2. 37.5%
7. Tour of facilities and presentation	A tour of Challenger TAFE Vocational Education and Training facilities, in the Horticultural College	1. 62.5% 2. 37.5%
8. Tour of facilities and Presentation	A tour of Challenger TAFE Vocational Education and Training facilities, in the Hospitality program	1. 62.5% 2. 37.5%

Activity	Description	Response
9.Presentation	Director of HRM at DETWA delivered a presentation, on Workforce planning and HRM.	1. 62.5% 2. 25% 3. 12.5%
10.Presentation	Risk Management, auditing and fraud prevention.	1. 75% 2. 25%
11.Presentation	Policy Development.	1. 75% 2. 12.5% 3. 12.5%
12. Tour and Presentation	Tour of School of Isolated and Distance Education, (SIDE)	1. 100%
13. Tour and Presentation	Tour of WESTONE which creates multi-media educational resources	1. 100%
14. Presentation	Leadership Centre	1. 62.5% 2. 25% 3. 12.5%
15. Tour and Presentation	Scitech, a dedicated commercial educational facility which uses interactive models and lectures to promote an understanding of science, ostensibly for	1. 100%
16. Presentation(s)	Curriculum Council of WA, the main body responsible for the accreditation, moderation, examination and certification of education in WA 1. Curriculum Framework 2. Post-Compulsory Education 3. Certification and Examinations 4. Accreditation and Moderation	1. 75% 2. 25%
17. Presentation	Student services unit at DETWA	1. 100%
18. Tour and Presentation	A Primary School noted for its number of Students at Educational Risk (SAER) program	1. 87.5% 2. 12.5%
19. Tour and Presentation	A Middle School noted for its pastoral care program	1. 87.5% 2. 12.5%
20. Plenary	A reflection and discussion program which was used in an attempt to prioritise areas for policy construction	1. 100%
21. Activity	Workplace shadowing of various counterparts	1. 87.5% 2. 12.5%
22. Presentation	Remote Teaching Unit	1. 87.5% 2. 12.5%
23. Presentation	DETWA's Fiscal management processes	1. 100%
24. Presentation	Schools System Performance	1. 60% 2. 40%
25. Presentation	Strategic Planning	1. 60% 2. 40%
26. Presentation	Professional Development	1. 60% 2. 40%
	Overall appraisal of program	1. 87.5% 2. 12.5%

Table 1. Summary of Tour Activities

The Fijian executive all rated the program as a high to very high quality experience. A content analysis of comments made in the participant evaluation was undertaken. Two members of CUT confirmed the reliability of these categories. An inter-rater reliability coefficient of ninety two percent was calculated using the formula from Huck, Cormier & Bounds (1974; 335):

$$\text{Percentage of agreement} = \frac{\text{Total number of agreements} \times 100}{\text{Total number} + \text{total number of agreements of disagreements}}$$

Comment Category	Frequency of Comment	% of Respondents
1	8	100
2	7	87.5
3	4	50
4	4	50
5	3	37.5
6	3	37.5
7	3	37.5
8	2	25
9	2	25

Table 2. Content analysis showing frequencies of open-ended responses to overall evaluation of the program

Description of Categories

Category 1. The program was enjoyable, valuable, relevant suitable, significant

Category 2. There was too much information and not enough time to absorb it

Category 3. Individuals should be posted to various units for 3-6months

Category 4. The standard of the program was very high

Category 5. The program should be more personalised to my own portfolio

Category 6. I was able to make a number of valuable contacts/networks

Category 7. The interactivity of the program was very valuable

Category 8. The curriculum framework is a very valuable resource

Category 9. We were able to develop a vision for future development in Fiji

Generally speaking, the content analysis indicated participants enjoyed a very positive experience, and were constructive in their perceptions of the value and relevance to the Fijian experience.

Conclusions

As a generalisation, participants in the tour perceived the tour of WA education facilities as a positive, valuable and relevant experience from which they could develop a number of initiatives in the formation of policy and strategic planning for education in their own country. The following summary of the resultant eleven priorities, which came about as a result of the tour follows;

Priority 1(a) - Curriculum

Planning

- Need to develop a five year plan/policy in the development of curriculum in Fiji

- This plan should adopt a KLA approach, using WA Curriculum Framework as a model
- The resultant plan should be implemented as a pilot program in one division (20-30 schools)
- From the trial, an evaluation should be conducted
- From the evaluation subsequent modification should be completed for roll out to all districts.

Considerations

- The new curriculum must be outcomes based.
- The cost and logistics of training must be considered.
- All stakeholders, including the community should be consulted on proposal for change.
- An appropriate time line should be negotiated.
- Appropriate assessment protocols need to be developed.

Recommendations

- A consultant liaison between the Fijian Ministry of Education and the Department of Education and Training (WA) needs to be established to assist in the transition from the current curriculum to the proposed Curriculum Framework approach.
- A comprehensive review of current curriculum and curriculum needs in Fiji needs to be undertaken
- A curriculum officer from Fiji MoE should spend up to three weeks in WA studying the Curriculum Framework
- Curriculum consultant from WA is sent to Fiji to assist in the upgrade.
- All MoE officers to be trained to deliver an implementation strategy to teachers of new curriculum
- Pre-service teacher training needs to be included in the program to ensure new teachers are adequately equipped for the new curriculum
- A group of personnel should be formed to evaluate the process and progress of curriculum reform.

Priority 1(b) - Arts Program

Planning

- Create a five year plan policy for the development of an Arts program which includes Visual Arts, Drama, Music, Theatre, Dance etc
- Consider the need to build specialist centres for gifted and talented students in the Arts

Considerations

- A gifted and talented program for students gifted in the Arts should be considered
- A venue for the program should be considered
- The program should be designed to move away from the examination oriented, content driven syllabus which is current with other subjects
- Need to consider the Australian model, how their programs were set up, costed, funded and sustained
- Look at the priority EU model for funding and developing this area.

Recommendations

- Set up one specialist Arts program centre per division where students can be sent either on a full time basis, and/or one that can be shared with other schools in the division
- Set up a specialist teacher training resource in the teachers colleges where talented teachers can be trained appropriately
- The program should be run from k-12

Priority 2 - Literacy and Numeracy

Planning

- Need to develop a three year plan/strategy
- Need to adapt from Australian sources, appropriate standards for testing of literacy and numeracy (eg WALNA)
- Need to adapt intervention strategies to assist low performing students

Considerations

- Realisation that some districts are showing poor literacy and numeracy skills
- Recognition that to build community standards will be a difficult and expensive task
- Recognition that school services and school support is currently inadequate

Recommendations

- Access all available intervention strategies for literacy and numeracy improvement programs suitable to the Fijian environment.
- Create a policy for the development and implementation of a School Services Unit along the lines of the WA model.
- Adopt a Fiji-wide literacy and numeracy diagnostic tool, similar to the Australian model
- Create a literacy/numeracy support net
- Revise current resources for literacy and numeracy and update and improve them.
- Upgrade teacher training (in-service and pre-service)

Priority 3 - Technical, Vocational Education and Training

Planning

- Develop a five year policy/planning document for the TAFE sector

Considerations

- Explore the possibility of franchising TAFE programs from other countries
- Need to consider the capacity for enterprise opportunities which facilitate self employment and therefore sustainability
- Move away from white collar employment to business operatives
- The possibility of integrating industry, government and education into a consortium for developing projects for employment/ work experience.

Recommendations

- A greater emphasis should be placed in TAFE on areas such as Maritime studies which include sustainable commercial applications such as Aquaculture, Agriculture and other feasible areas.
- Education and Industry form relationships which enhance work experience and training opportunities

- Set up a qualifications framework for the delivery of TVET
- An accreditation board similar to the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) is set up to monitor the standards of provision of education by the TAFE sector and registered training organizations.
- Provide opportunities for career pathways for students which can be integrated between the schools and TAFE and universities, similar to the WA model

Priority 4 - Human Resource Management

Planning

- Need to develop a five year planning and policy program
- Consideration needs to be given to the creation of a centralised Human Resource Management unit
- Implement a training needs analysis program which also aids in the discovery of current available resources

Recommendations

- Establish a Human Resource Management Unit in the ministry
- Create a site within the ministry where all in-service training and planning can be facilitated
- Resource a professional development facility for all MoE people
- Include a leadership training facility for Teachers Colleges, Principals and Heads of Departments
- Develop a leadership training course(s)
- Set up a process for the monitoring of professional standards to include all MoE employees, including teachers, officers, administration and ancillary staff
- Create an independent professional board through legislation which oversees standards and quality control in teaching

Priority 4 (a) - Leadership Centre

It is considered that an adequately resourced, carefully planned leadership centre is a matter of priority

Priority 5 (a) - Distance and Isolated Education

Planning

- Need to develop a model similar to the WA system for the delivery of education to distant and isolated students
- Create a three year policy and plan on the implementation of an upgraded distance and isolated education unit

Considerations

- Need to consider the placement of the unit within Fiji
- Need to consider the set up and cost of infrastructure to develop electronic means of education delivery to distant and isolated students
- Need to evaluate the sort of facilities needed to deliver appropriate education

Recommendations

- Develop a liaison with other providers of distance and isolated education units, such as the SIDE program in WA to ascertain the best model for delivery to students in Fiji and to share resources
- Create a fully resourced unit for the delivery of these programs
- Develop the infrastructure to deliver electronic resources to isolated and distant students
- Attach teachers, writers and material producers with expertise to the unit in order to facilitate resources for the program
- Establish training facilities and resources for staff to fully realise the unit's potential
- Liaise with government or a potential commercial ISP to create inexpensive and accessible electronic communication
- A suitable consultant should be placed in Fiji to oversee and assist in developing this program.

Priority 5 (b) WESTONE

It was considered that a capacity building relationship be developed with WESTONE to take advantage of available resources which are pertinent to the new initiatives suggested for the Fijian curriculum

Priority 6 - Student Services Unit

Planning

- Create a five-year policy/plan for the implementation of a student services unit.
- Create a policy for the organisation and running of hostels
- Create a policy which encompasses special education needs

Considerations

- Access and Equity for all students to a quality education
- Behaviour management program
- Pastoral care program
- Counselling services
- Monitoring of personal and academic development
- Disability services

Recommendations

- A comprehensive overhaul of processes for access and equity for all students to quality education, behaviour management, pastoral care, and counselling, personal and academic progress and disability services is undertaken with an aim to improve the quality of student care.
- Separate academic and management/ancillary hostel staff from each other
- Pre-service teachers and in-service teachers need to be trained in the management of students with special needs as described above
- Students with special needs should be integrated into mainstream classes where feasible
- Training of parents to facilitate home schooling should be investigated

Priority 7 - Risk Management/Fiscal Management

Planning

- A three year planning and policy program for risk management should be developed immediately

Considerations

- Need for a consistent fiscal management system across the board
- Need for consistent resources management system across the board
- Need for training of responsible administrators and leaders in resources and fiscal management

Recommendations

- An immediate external audit of all schools and support infrastructure in resources, staffing and fiscal management be conducted
- A system of financial and resources management training program, including appropriate hardware and software training, training for fraud prevention and report falsification be applied consistently across the board
- A separate policy unit responsible for the above, be created to oversee the successful implementation of these recommendations

Priority 8 - Early Childhood Education

Planning

- A national policy and planning structure should be developed for a three year trial

Considerations

- There is a need for more ECE centres
- There should be more trained ECE teachers
- The use of community halls to establish ECE centres for remote communities which could be developed into regional centres should be considered to avoid the need for young children to have to leave for boarding school
- Resources need to be supplied to these regional centres.

Recommendations

- Developing a national policy on ECE is a priority which should start immediately

Priority 9 - Post-Secondary Schooling

Planning

- Need to create three year policy plan

Considerations

- The way examinations drive curriculum and teacher input needs to be reconsidered
- Work based training which articulates into vocational accreditation needs to be considered
- Fijian Institute of Technology (FIT) needs to open up courses for school leavers
- FIT should provide distance education
- Need to develop specialisation from years 5 and 6 after a broad based education has been completed

- Current courses too narrow and need to be diversified

Recommendations

- Evaluate Australian and WA examinations systems and curriculum for consideration as a model for Fiji system
- Evaluate the Australian and WA vocational accreditation system for possible adaptation to Fiji
- Reporting system as it stands in Fiji must be evaluated and upgraded

Priority 10 - Compulsory Education

Planning

- A three year planning and policy document needs to be formulated to drive compulsory education systematically and consistently

Considerations

- The meaning of the word “compulsory” needs to be investigated, as it does not accurately reflect the current situation
- The whole system needs to be reconsidered in relation to cost to parents, financial difficulties, uniforms, books, sports equipment, boarding fees etc.
- Reporting systems as they stand should be re-evaluated

Recommendations

- A curriculum development unit should be formed
- An independent curriculum council, similar to the WA model should be developed. A consultant with appropriate expertise should be sought to develop this initiative
- An accreditation body for the entire education system should be formed
- The Ministry of Education and the Training sector should be merged.

Priority 11 - Science Centre

It was recognised that a science centre modelled on the Western Australian Scitech venture should be considered for the teachers colleges, using the Science Cookbook as a resource.

It was considered viable and sustainable if student teachers, as a part of their training, built and maintained the resources, which children could then utilise either at a centre or as a travelling road show.

Although the list of recommendations based on the Western Australian experience looks very encouraging, it remains to be seen that these priorities can indeed be implemented, especially in consideration of local conditions and financial constraints. A second tour of another group of senior Fijian executives will begin soon. The follow up study will compare the findings of both groups, and the study beyond that will monitor the progress of the recommendations that go to policy and are actually implemented or not implemented and why.

Whatever the outcome, this research bears out the quality of the management skills of ACIL on behalf of AusAid. Their faith in the Fijian Ministry of Education executive, who are the key stakeholders in this initiative, in mounting this enormous project appears to be well justified. It has provided a springboard for improvement in the delivery and quality of education in Fiji, and has provided for a nexus between the

Department of Education in WA and Curtin University of Technology, for an ongoing relationship into the future with our South Pacific neighbour.

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