



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

Pacific Island Countries, China & Sustainable Development Goals Part 3: Chinese Scholarships in the Pacific

Denghua Zhang, Steve Hogg, and Shaun Gessler

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Introduction

This In Brief is the third in a four-part series that explores China's development cooperation with Pacific island countries (PICs) according to the UN 2030 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). The previous two parts focused on China–PICs broad engagement on the SDGs and the [Belt and Road initiative](#). Building on the authors' research, supported by a recent survey of 46 PIC recipients of Chinese scholarships, this paper analyses the role that increasing numbers of scholarships play in projecting Chinese soft power, encouraging better understanding of Chinese foreign policy and culture, supporting capacity building in PICs, and the potential to support SDG implementation in the region.¹

China's Scholarships for PICs

The provision of Chinese government scholarships to students from developing countries constitutes an important part of China's rapidly expanding foreign aid program. In the long run, Beijing expects its education of talented youth in these countries, many of whom could become elites in the future, to bolster its [soft power](#). Take the dual master degree program managed by China's Ministries of Education and Commerce. The official media reported that, through this program, the Chinese government aims to 'train talented people, elite people and pro-China people who have the potential to become future leaders' in recipient countries' (Chen and Ding 2010). This objective is further supported by [Confucius Institute Headquarters \(Hanban\)](#), which provides Mandarin promotion programs overseas. Through these programs, Beijing strives to encourage people in developing countries to understand China (*zhihua*), be pro-China (*qinhua*) and befriend China (*youhua*), though many of these activities are [viewed with suspicion](#).

As [China's interest and commitment to the Pacific deepens](#), a growing number of PIC students have studied, or will be studying, at Chinese universities under two main Chinese government scholarship schemes. The most common scholarship is granted by China bilaterally to eight diplomatic allies in the region —

PNG, Fiji, Vanuatu, the Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, and Niue. A total of 1080 students from six PICs had been awarded Chinese government scholarships and studied in China by the end of 2016. Importantly, the number of scholarships being granted by China is increasing significantly. For instance, China provided 96 scholarships to Fiji from 2011 to 2016, while the total number of Chinese scholarships to Fiji was 61 for the previous 17 years of [1984–2010](#).

Another Chinese scholarship is delivered through the [Pacific Island Forum](#) (PIF) to its member states. It is open to all the 14 PICs including Taiwan's allies. As [an official](#) from the China office of Pacific Trade Invest noted, Taiwan's six PIC allies are not only eligible to apply for the China's PIF scholarships, but have enjoyed more opportunities recently as the other PICs are mainly using China's fast growing bilateral scholarship. To realise Chinese leadership's [commitment](#) to increasing scholarships for the Pacific, China has doubled the number of China–PIF scholarships to [20](#) for 2017–18. In addition to the two main schemes, a small number of scholarships are financed through the [ambassador grant](#) managed by Chinese embassies in PICs.

Under China's scholarship schemes, PIC students pursue bachelor (four to five years), masters (two to three years), or doctoral (three to four years) degrees in addition to intense Mandarin training in the first year or two. China also funds Pacific scholars (general or senior types) to conduct research in China for duration of one to two years after the first year of Mandarin training. Awardees of Chinese scholarships are exempt from fees for tuition and basic accommodation on campus, and receive monthly living allowances from host institutions at varying rates per month: undergraduate, US\$360 (RMB2,500);² masters degree students and general scholars, US\$432 (RMB3,000); doctoral degree students and senior scholars, US\$504 (RMB3,500).

Survey of PIC Students in China

The survey was designed by the authors and distributed online to PIC students in China randomly. The questionnaire covered the students' country of origin, basic information about their scholarship, perception of scholarship, suggestions for

improvement, and recommendations for China–PICs education cooperation on SDGs. A total of 46 anonymous responses were received between July and August 2017. Among them, 18 respondents identified as being from Papua New Guinea; 11 from Vanuatu; two from Samoa; one each from Fiji, Tonga, and the Federated States of Micronesia; and 12 unidentified.

Survey Results

Students were asked to rate on scale of 1 to 10 (1=very bad, 10=very good) several features of their university experiences, including the scholarship program, living experience, satisfaction with the living allowance, ability to make friends with Chinese classmates, Chinese-language training quality, general teaching quality, and the overall usefulness of their degrees for future career prospects. Overall, PIC students have a positive view of Chinese scholarship program. Some 74.3% of the students gave a score of 7 or above for their experience of education in China; 81.7% of the students rated their Chinese language training at 7 or above; for 70% of the students, the teaching quality in their fields scored 7 or above at host universities. More encouragingly, 87.5% of the students believed Chinese scholarship program will be useful for their future career and rated it 7 or above.

The Chinese scholarship program could potentially play a significant role in supporting PICs to achieve the SDGs. A high proportion of surveyed students listed Chinese technology, language and culture, and ideas in sectors such as infrastructure as three most important things they have learned under the scheme. As the [shortage of skilled management and technical personnel](#) poses an enormous challenge for PICs to achieve the SDGs, the Chinese scholarship program could fill some of the gap. China is training PIC students in a wide range of disciplines such as accounting, administrative management, architecture, law, business, computer science, environment, finance, foreign affairs, history, international trade, economics, and medicine. It merits attention that PNG students accounted for 75% of PIC students studying the sub-sectors of engineering including geological, harbour, mining, civil, and petroleum, which could be closely linked to the booming mining industry in PNG. In addition to the acquisition of technical expertise, PIC students' knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, and ideas gained in China would facilitate their further learning about China and support for PICs–China engagement. This, to some extent, can be perceived as Beijing's success in promoting its soft power among PICs' younger generations.

Recommendations

The positive attitudes of many of Pacific students surveyed suggest that the provision of scholarships could have an

impact on China's soft power, though the extent is debatable. This enriches the debate in the literature by scholars who argues that China is proactively projecting its soft power in the higher education sector (Yang 2010), and who claims that the Canadian government has promoted the internationalisation of its higher education as Canada's soft power (Trilokekar 2010).

While applauding the Chinese scholarship program, PIC students participating in the survey also recommended improvements, such as introducing more courses in English at bachelor level, and increasing monthly student stipend and travel allowance. Some recommendations could also assist China–PICs education cooperation on SDGs. These include: more support to the education sector in PICs; increasing the intake of Pacific students at Chinese universities; strengthening education exchange between Chinese universities and Pacific universities/colleges; involving Pacific students in SDGs-related training programs; introducing tailored courses on SDGs. These recommendations deserve more attention from the Chinese government and Pacific island countries.

Notes on Authors

Denghua Zhang submitted his PhD thesis on Chinese foreign aid and trilateral aid cooperation at SSGM in March 2017. Steve Hogg is a senior fellow at SSGM. He has worked for more than 20 years in the Pacific. Shaun Gessler is a PhD candidate at SSGM.

Endnotes

Denghua Zhang is a native Chinese speaker; several hyperlinks in this paper are to Chinese webpages with no English versions.

- 1 The authors are working on more robust research on China's soft power and scholarships in the Pacific.
- 2 One US dollar bought 6.94 RMB in December 2016.

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