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AUSTRALIAN AID FOR EDUCATION IN THE PACIFIC

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Economic performance in Pacific island countries over the last few years has been poor. Growth rates of GNP and GNP per head have in some cases been negative in recent years. Employment has stagnated, unemployment in the traditional sectors has been growing and underemployment in the traditional sectors has been continuing, despite significant emigration in some instances.

At the same time educational development in the Pacific has been disappointing in a number of key respects. Participation rates are still low by developing country standards, and school retention rates are below average, especially in rural areas. Participation of females in education is low in some countries. Furthermore, the quality of education being provided in the region is uneven, especially at the school level. The standard of school leavers is considered in many instances to be inadequate for formal employment or self-employment, and even for those who complete a full secondary education there can be severe difficulties at the tertiary level because of deficiencies in their preparation in mathematics, science and English.

In 1985-86 Australia spent A\$71.6 million in bilateral aid to the countries of the South Pacific, representing just under 10 per cent of Australia's total aid allocations in that year. Of the total aid going to the South Pacific, A\$20.4 million (29 per cent) was spent on education. This amount includes an estimate of just over A\$6 million to account for the cost of the tuition subsidy provided to students from the region studying at Australian tertiary institutions.

The distribution of Australian educational aid to the South Pacific by educational level has strongly favoured the tertiary sector. In 1985-86, 64 per cent of aid allocations were at the tertiary level, whilst only 16 per cent in total went to primary and secondary levels, and 14 per cent to vocational and technical education.

Analysis of the functional distribution of Australian bilateral aid for education in the South Pacific shows that in 1985-86 about two-thirds went on training costs (including the overseas student cost subsidy). The remainder was spent on support for the University of the South Pacific (USP), and on school building projects. Only a small fraction was spent on teacher training.

A large proportion of the education aid budget for the South Pacific is actually spent in Australia.

For example, the allocation to training (direct costs and the implied subsidy) comprises expenditures that remain in this country. Even the allocations to in-country and regional aid contain a large proportion that is expended on Australian staff and advisers and on Australian goods and materials.

Fiji is the largest recipient of Australian educational aid in absolute terms, because of its preponderant representation in the numbers of tertiary students from the region undergoing aid-assisted training. In per capita terms, however, the largest recipients of Australian educational aid (not counting aid to USP) in 1985-86 were Tonga and Vanuatu (A\$16-17 per head), with Fiji and the Solomon Islands each receiving about A\$10 per head. Western Samoa and Kiribati were the lowest recipients in that year (A\$7-8 per head).

Analysis of aid patterns is rendered difficult by serious shortcomings in data availability and quality. There are a number of inconsistencies within the data in AIDAB publications, resulting for example from differences in functional classifications used in different contexts. The rationalization and improvement of statistical collection and reporting procedures relating to this area of AIDAB's responsibility seem long overdue.

The emphasis on tertiary training as the dominant form of Australian aid to the countries of the South Pacific has suited Australia's interests. It is a very visible form of aid, with substantial multiplier effects and possibly some beneficial externalities accruing to this country which would be lost if the aid were spent offshore. There also seems to have been an uncritical acceptance of the notion that provision of tertiary and vocational education, especially in the fields of technology and administration, is the most immediate and practical way of contributing towards economic growth in the region, since at these levels and in

these fields Australia has something to offer that the Pacific island countries cannot provide for themselves. Furthermore, this form of aid provision has matched and reinforced the private demands of students from the region, who seek an internationally recognized qualification for entry into employment in the modern sector in their own country or abroad. It is not surprising, therefore, that considerable pressure has been exerted on Australia by prospective students through their own governments for maintenance and extension of this form of aid.

However, this pattern of educational aid to the Pacific countries has not addressed the real problems of educational development in these countries in the last few years. Indeed these problems have been most acute in precisely those areas that Australian aid has largely avoided, namely the primary and secondary school sectors and teacher training. Overall, in a broad cost-benefit context, the conclusion cannot be avoided that Australian aid for education in the Pacific has not maximized its potential contribution either to educational development or to economic growth in countries in the region.

A major constraint on educational development at the primary and secondary levels in the Pacific is imposed by a shortage of trained teachers. There would seem to be a strong case for increased assistance to improve the supply of trained teachers, for example through in-service training, the upgrading and expansion of teacher training facilities in the region itself, and the provision of training awards specifically for teacher training.

Aid for curriculum development purposes has taken the form of the provision of technical advisers, the running of workshops and the supply of educational materials, but the amounts involved have been small. AIDAB's Pacific Regional Team has

concentrated some attention on the curriculum area and has made some useful progress. But there remain many cases of inappropriate and outdated curricula in use in schools in the region. At the secondary level, conflicts between 'academic' and 'vocational' curricula continue. There is scope for aid-assisted curriculum projects at a regional level which identify the extent to which shared problems could be met on a cooperative basis.

In the direct production and infrastructure sectors of Pacific island country economics, provision for capital works is a major form of aid. However, in education this type of aid is minor. Yet in most countries there exist deficiencies in buildings, plant and/or equipment at the school level, which are imposing real constraints in the delivery of teaching services. An expanded role for Australian educational aid in this respect seems clear, although progress depends crucially on the use of proper techniques of project identification and appraisal before commitment of funds, to avoid the choice of inappropriate projects, and to maximize the return at the margin on the aid expenditure.

In this area of vocational and technical training, Australian aid has been quite significant, amounting to almost A\$3 million in 1985-86. However, the real value of some of this training to recipient countries is very doubtful. There are many instances of poor selection procedures, provision of inappropriate courses, and inadequate monitoring of students. In particular the cost-effectiveness of the International Training Institute (ITI) as a means of delivering vocational training must be seriously questioned. A much sharper focusing of vocational and technical training is required, for example to supplement on-the-job training, and to provide basic skills required for self-employment. There is a case for the development of increased local and

regional capacity for this form of training.

The small size of the market for post-school educational services in the Pacific means that some form of regional cooperation is the only possibility if at least some scale economies in the delivery of teaching outputs at this level are to be reaped. Although individual countries might wish for their own independent universities for political and prestige reasons, the economic arguments all point to regional level facilities. Even so, in the short run, costs per student are likely to remain higher than in Australian or New Zealand institutions, and the development of academic standards to international levels will continue to be difficult. Nevertheless, long-run arguments point to the desirability of local (i.e. regional) capacity at the tertiary level, and the USP clearly provides the basis for achieving this, provided the existing anomalies in its organization and financing are resolved, and a means established for rational forward planning in both academic and administrative areas.

At the same time there is considerable scope for the development of strong, viable post-secondary community colleges in all but the smallest countries of the region, offering a wide range of technical, vocational and academic courses tailored to suit the needs of each country, and coordinated to share facilities and to exchange students wherever possible. Such colleges could be expected to make a particular contribution towards teacher training, health-worker training, training for other vocational and technical skills, preparation for formal tertiary entry at the USP or elsewhere, and nonformal education. The development of such a network of facilities could become a major initiative for Australian aid in the immediate future.

The procedures used to select students for training, including those

sponsored by AIDAB, do not always operate effectively. An integrated selection-monitoring-evaluation program would reduce wastage through failure and dropout, and would help direct training aid into areas that more effectively meet the development requirements of each country. Furthermore, there is a case for additional focus on employment-related considerations (e.g. in-service training, employment release, or employer-sponsored training) rather than on a general pre-employment training which predominates at present.

A problem area for most Pacific island countries, especially the smaller ones, lies in their administrative and managerial capacity to plan and implement policies for rapid educational development. Imaginative schemes exist which Australia could pursue for upgrading managerial skills in the region, for example by short- or medium-term secondments of expatriate personnel to assist in setting up or extending local educational planning units and to train staff in running them. In due course such units could become very important in policy formulation in key areas such as educational financing and the promotion of equity in educational opportunity.

Australia could also contribute to educational development in the region by supporting a regional-based system of certified standards in education. A series of graded certifications could thus be available to all Pacific island students as an indication of their achievement level, for the information of parents, teachers, student sponsors such as AIDAB, and prospective employers. The body most likely to be able to develop and administer such a system is the South Pacific Board of Educational Assessment (SPBEA).

The decision processes which determine the overall level of Australian aid and its distribution amongst sectors and countries need further improvement, especially through provision of more precise estimates of the quantitative contribution of aid in various sectors to economic growth in countries in the region, as a guide to resource allocation within and between aid functions and recipient countries. Even without such precise estimates, however, it seems clear that Australian aid for education can indeed yield high returns at the margin, but that it can do so to the fullest extent only if present emphases are changed in the sorts of directions noted above.