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Weaving Our Research Relationships: People, Belonging, and Pacific Futures

Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa

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Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa delivering the Keynote Speech, with a copy of *Oceanic Diplomacy: Reasserting Indigenous Pathways through the Contemporary Pacific* beside her
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Weaving Our Research Relationships: People, Belonging, and Pacific Futures

Ou te mua'i fa'atulou ma faatalofa le paia o Samoa ua potopoto i ona tulaga faalupe. O le tautalaga lenei taeao, o le tatou sao lea ia Manuao i le lenei koneferenise taua, o le State of the Pacific i le laumua nei i le Iunivesite Aoao a Ausetalia (Australian National University).

Elder Paul House and the people of Ngunnawal and Ngambri, thank you for the sacred Welcome to Country this morning. I begin by acknowledging the Indigenous custodians of the land and acknowledge all Aboriginal Indigenous and Torres Strait elders and people here today.

Thank you to the Reverend Dr 'Ungatea Fonua Kata for uplifting this conference and the gathering of Pacific minds in your prayer. Thank you also for the special welcome by Minister for Pacific Island Affairs the Honourable Pat Conroy, and the warm hospitality of the Dean of the College of Asia and the Pacific, Professor Helen Sullivan. I recognise the Pacific elders, leaders, scholars, practitioners, and students, and our Pacific communities present here and joining us from across the region online. It is an honour to be invited to reflect with you and to share insights at the State of the Pacific 2026 conference on the theme Weaving Pacific Research Relationships. In doing so, I centre my reflections on people, belonging, and Pacific futures.

I want to begin not with theory, not with policy language, but with lived experience. When I first became Prime Minister, I was asked a question that many leaders are asked: 'What is your vision?' My answer was deliberately simple: 'I want a Samoa where people want to stay — and where they have a stake.'

That statement was not a rejection of mobility.

Movement and/or free mobility has always been part of Pacific life. Our ancestors were navigators, settlers, adapters, and innovators. Long before modern borders or migration policies, Pacific peoples crossed vast oceans in search of sustenance, safety, and opportunity. In more recent times, Pacific families have continued this tradition through migration for education, employment, and security.

Before I entered politics, I was myself a product of this movement — a young Samoan who moved to Aotearoa New Zealand for secondary and tertiary education. Like many Pacific families, mine believed mobility was necessary to widen opportunity. It was never framed as abandoning home, but as strengthening it.

What I meant, then and now, is that staying should remain a viable, dignified, and meaningful choice. The true measure of nationhood is not whether people can leave, but whether they can imagine a future at home without feeling left behind.

That question — why people stay, why they leave, and why they return — goes to the heart of Pacific nation-building today.

Nation-building and the foundations of belonging

In the early years of independence, there was clarity of purpose. Our foremothers, our forefathers, and elders took responsibility for shaping their destiny, asserting sovereignty not only as a legal status but as a moral commitment to our people. Institutions were built to reflect culture, spirituality, and collective responsibility — what we understand as *faasinomaga*, belonging.

Those early years demanded sacrifice. Resources were scarce. External pressures were real. Yet there was unity in vision. Education, health systems, public service institutions, and infrastructure were prioritised because they were understood as investments in people. Development was not abstract; it was relational.

Crucially, we understood our place in the region. Solidarity with neighbouring Pacific nations, alongside principled engagement with external partners, provided stability and gradual opportunity. But the context we now face has changed profoundly.

New realities, new pressures

I entered Parliament in 1985 carrying the values shaped by my family and village, and I have served in Cabinet since 1991. Those values — humility, responsibility, and service — have guided me through decades of change. These values I also share as part of our *aiga* (family) of scholars who have taken time to study how our peoples reassert Indigenous diplomacy — Oceanic diplomacy. We will relaunch this collection on Thursday.

Today, Pacific societies operate within a far more complex and demanding global environment. Globalisation has compressed distance and time, geopolitics has intensified competition for influence, and digital connectivity has reshaped aspiration. Institutions are scrutinised more heavily. Trust is increasingly fragile. Public expectations are higher, while tolerance for long-term planning is lower.

Development has delivered gains, but it has also produced unintended consequences. Movement from rural communities into towns was once framed as progress. Now, mobility increasingly extends beyond national borders into regional and global labour markets. Migration is not new — but its scale, speed, and impact are.

Too often, viability is discussed as a technical issue. We measure it using economic indicators, productivity figures, or fiscal ratios. These metrics matter, but they rarely capture what viability truly means.

Rather, viability is personal.

When people leave, it is rarely from lack of attachment. More often, it is because migration becomes necessary to support families and protect what remains at home. This reality compels us to ask whether our development models have drained the very communities that sustain us.

It is shaped inside our families, our households, rather than ministries. It emerges in conversations between our *aiga*, between elders, parents, and children. It is expressed through questions that carry emotional weight: Is there work with paid income here? Can we afford to stay? Will my children be safe, educated, and hopeful?

When people decide to leave, it is not because they lack attachment. More often, it is because in order to build their homes, provide the best for families and protect their heartlands, they must migrate to search for paid work in the cities, or overseas in the agriculture fields of Australia and New Zealand.

This reality forces us to confront difficult truths. These are not only the questions in villages in the Pacific, but also in rural Australia. Did our development models inadvertently hollow out the very communities that sustained us? Did progress concentrate opportunity in ways that drained rural and outer-island life? When communities lose their young people, caregivers, and future leaders, what remains — and who carries the future?

Mobility should not be misread as failure. People move because they seek dignity, security, and opportunity. Migration is a signal — revealing where systems are unequal and opportunities uneven.

The challenge is not to reverse history but to rethink development. How do we create meaningful livelihoods locally? How do we strengthen rural and outer-island communities so staying is a choice, not a compromise? Nation-building is an ongoing negotiation between belonging and growth, mobility, and rootedness. Sovereignty, in this sense, is lived.

Smallness and the Blue Pacific

We continue to honour the Pacific Way — a worldview grounded in relationships, values, and collective responsibility. From this worldview emerged the Blue Pacific narrative, which recentres our region around shared stewardship of one of the world's largest ocean spaces.

As Epeli Hau'ofa so powerfully reminded us, our ocean connects us rather than dividing us. In reclaiming it as our home and shared asset, the Blue Pacific affirms regional solidarity and Pacific agency on our own terms.

But we must also be honest: Pacific states are small. Our populations, economies, and institutions are limited. Policy frameworks that assume scale place unrealistic pressure on small states. Smallness is not our weakness; denying it is. Designing for smallness enables smarter governance and stronger regional cooperation.

Acknowledging structural constraints does not absolve responsibility; it sharpens strategy. Honest design for smallness enables smarter governance, targeted investment, and collaborative regional approaches. Without this honesty, viability remains elusive.

Self-determination re-imagined

Today, self-determination cannot be understood only as political independence. Power moves quickly, climate change threatens physical security and identity, and global systems often undervalue care and community.

Self-determination must be lived agency — the ability to choose how we belong, whom we partner with, and which principles we protect. The response lies in collective regional strength, not isolation.

Universities at the centre of Pacific futures

In this complex landscape, universities occupy a pivotal position. Universities are not neutral actors. Universities shape ideas, leadership, and policy imagination. Universities determine whose knowledge is valued, which research questions are prioritised, and how future leaders are educated.

First, research must align more closely with Pacific priorities. Climate resilience, migration, governance, health, livelihood security, and ocean stewardship are not abstract academic themes; they are lived realities. Research agendas should be co-designed with Pacific communities, institutions, and scholars, and grounded in ethical partnership rather than extraction.

Second, curriculum matters deeply. Education systems must prepare students for global engagement while grounding them in Pacific histories, languages, values, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Universities should enable graduates not only to succeed abroad, but to return, contribute, and lead at home.

Third, institutional partnerships must be re-imagined. Relationships between universities in Australia and the Pacific must be long term, reciprocal, and capacity-building. Joint degrees, co-supervised research, staff mobility, and sustained investment in Pacific academic leadership matter far more than short-term projects. We need to see Pacific Island researchers excel in leadership and be in positions to serve both societies, in the Pacific and in Australia.

Universities that take this responsibility seriously become engines of self-determination rather than instruments of legacy power.

Research, policy, and impact

Knowledge is powerful only if it travels. Too often, research is produced, celebrated, and archived without influencing decision-making. We must ask difficult questions: Who reads our work? Who uses it? Where is accountability for impact?

In many Pacific states, national statistical offices have shaped policy more consistently than universities — not because their insights are deeper, but because their evidence flows directly into the machinery of government. Universities must be part of that same flow, ensuring that research, analysis, and long-term thinking inform decision-making where it matters most. They must position themselves as bridges — linking evidence to leadership, long-term thinking to short-term political cycles, and transnational expertise to local priorities.

Education is not simply skills training; it is nation-building. It shapes who stays, who leaves, who returns, and who leads. Pacific Studies at ANU serves not only Australia, but the Pacific itself — functioning as a knowledge bridge that connects Pacific priorities with Australian government and society, and vice versa. We look to deeper and more sustained engagement by ANU with our Pacific universities, scholars, and students.

Pacific Studies at ANU holds particular responsibility in this moment. It can serve as connector, broker, and bridge — linking lived experience with scholarship, Indigenous knowledge with policy, and regional narratives with global debates.

Decolonisation is not a historical exercise; it is a living process. It requires shifting power in knowledge production. Indigenous epistemologies must be recognised as theory and method, not as cultural supplements. Pacific peoples must define research priorities, control narratives, and benefit directly from academic work. Pacific Studies must have a home here in ANU.

Universities must also examine themselves: who leads, whose voices are amplified, and whose knowledge is treated as authoritative. Indigenous governance is not only something to study — it is something to practise.

A final reflection

Let me conclude where this reflection began — with people, belonging, and choice. The future of the Pacific will not be secured by borders, balance sheets, or policy frameworks alone, but by whether our people can imagine a meaningful life at home, connected to place, culture, and community.

Mobility will continue, as it always has in our oceanic history, but staying must remain a dignified and viable choice, not a sacrifice. Nationbuilding today is about designing systems — economic, educational, and institutional — that value people where they are, strengthen local opportunity, and honour the Pacific Way of facing challenges together.

The Blue Pacific reminds us that we are not small, isolated states but a region bound by a shared

ocean, shared responsibility, and shared destiny. Our task — whether as leaders, scholars, or institutions — is to ensure our knowledge, partnerships, and policies serve Pacific agency on Pacific terms, so that our people not only move through the world with confidence, but always know they belong, and always have a reason to return.

One of my favourite Samoan proverbs — one that has guided my leadership in the village, in government, and in international settings — is *O le mativa fa'afesaga'i*. It reminds us that in times of challenge, hardship, adversity, or poverty — as they inevitably come — we do not turn our backs on one another; we face each other, face to face, fully present. It speaks to collective survival, shared responsibility, and the quiet strength that comes from standing together with dignity.

When I say that I want a Samoa where people want to stay — and where they have a stake — I mean a Samoa where people feel there is something precious worth holding on to: our land, our language, our culture, our families, and our future. A stake is more than economics; it is belonging. It is the quiet but powerful commitment to protect what we love, to work for it, and to stand for one another — especially when times are hardest — because our future is not built by those who turn away, but by those who face each other and stay.

Author notes

Her Excellency Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa is the former Prime Minister of Samoa (2021–2025). She holds the traditional chiefly title of Fiamē, which was conferred in 1977.

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Department of Pacific Affairs
Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs
ANU College of Asia and the Pacific
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2600

E dpa@anu.edu.au
W dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au

DepartmentofPacificAffairs
@anudpa
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