



Innovative Research Universities submission — Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region

July 2024

Introduction

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Islands and the Pacific region.

The IRU has greater engagement with the Pacific than any other group of Australian universities. We recognise the significant investment made by the Australian Government in strengthening Pacific partnerships. There is, however, still much to do to enhance the relationship between Australia and its Pacific neighbours and we believe that education cooperation and research collaboration can play a valuable role in the next phase of our partnership.

The IRU believes that investment in collaborative and equal partnerships — taking into account the priorities of the Pacific region — are critical to Australia's future actions.

Key recommendations:

- The Pacific Islands Forum's *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* should inform the committee's response to this inquiry.
- In line with Pacific and Australian priorities, particular areas of focus for future collaboration should include:
 - Inclusive, equitable and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities.
 - Stronger collaboration on climate change mitigation and clean energy for regional economic development.
 - Adoption of new technologies in education and health.
- Co-designed capability development programs that incentivise skilled workers to remain in the Pacific.
- Increased Pacific cultural heritage awareness among Australian academics, researchers and policymakers through greater Australia to the Pacific mobility and connection to Pasifika communities in Australia.
- To address geopolitical, security and emergency management challenges, support deeper people-to-people links and complementary research partnerships.
- The Australian Government should fund the new Australia-Pacific university mobility and collaboration initiative co-designed and proposed by the IRU and USP.

Innovative Research Universities and the Pacific

IRU universities have greater engagement with the Pacific than any other Australian university group.

A 2023 study led by (IRU member) Griffith University's Pacific Hub identified the depth and breadth of our Pacific engagement and established that IRU Pacific engagement is most successfully driven from co-design principles with Pacific partners.

In recent years, IRU universities have supported 12 New Colombo Plan (NCP) scholars, over 140 NCP mobility programs and more than 1,200 students between IRU universities and our Pacific partners.

The IRU network's engagements across the Pacific include:

- Over 210 collaborations/partnerships each in Fiji and Papua New Guinea
- 187 in whole-of-region collaborations
- 92 in Solomon Islands
- 80 in Vanuatu
- 57 in New Caledonia
- Over 100 shared among another 12 Pacific Island nations.

Our partners for these engagements include:

- Pacific Research Institutes, NGOs and Community Organisations
- Pacific Governing Bodies
- Pacific Islands Universities Research Network (PIURN)
- Australian Government and Associated Bodies.

In its 2024-25 pre-Budget submission ([link](#)), the IRU outlined a proposal to co-design and lead a program to boost staff mobility, innovative teaching and learning, research collaboration and administrative capability building with universities in the Pacific.

The program, developed in conjunction with the University of the South Pacific (USP), would place Australian academics and professionals in Pacific universities, strengthen institutions, build research collaboration with the PIURN, and drive the next generation of Australia–Pacific links in higher education and research.

The joint proposal builds on a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between USP and the IRU signed in September 2023.

Key priorities for Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region

The partnership between the IRU and USP has led to a deeper understanding of the priorities of Pacific institutions and the opportunities for jointly addressing these through closer collaboration. Key strategic priorities identified by USP for collaboration with Australian partners in its mission to support greater regional cooperation include:

- Climate change
- Youth populations facing poor economic prospects and poor educational outcomes
- The need for regional ICT cooperation and digitalisation
- The importance of preserving and promoting Pacific cultures and heritage.

These are areas where the capabilities of IRU universities can play a valuable role in strengthening collaboration, building upon existing education and research links.

Climate change

In 2018, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders identified climate change as “the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of the people of the Pacific” (Boe Declaration September 2018).

Australia should boost research collaboration and projects to mitigate the effects of climate change in the region and provide realistic and implementable solutions to regional economic and energy needs that do not contribute further to the problem.

Opportunities exist within the IRU–USP proposal for just this type of research collaboration. The combination of Pacific and Australian academic and research expertise and the opportunity for Australian researchers to participate *in-situ* with Pacific counterparts would provide a greater impetus to address these critical climate issues.

Youth and education

On average almost a fifth of the population of Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) member countries comprise youth between the ages of 15 and 24. If the region’s economies are to grow sustainably, this significant cohort must be able to access education, training, and skilled employment.

If they can go on to access quality advanced education, the Pacific’s youth offer an important development opportunity for the region.

A feature of the partnership between USP and Australia is the emphasis on improved teacher education across member countries and the IRU–USP MoU underpins this aspiration. Greater Australian Government support for co-designed teaching and training capability building programs that align Pacific expertise with Australian economic advantage, will be a key driver of this opportunity.

ICT cooperation and digitalisation

ICT is essential for sustainable development, disaster risk management and response, and cybersecurity, all issues which IRU, USP and Pacific Islands Leaders recognise as key concerns for the region.

In its strategic framework USP focuses on regional cooperation and digitalisation to address national needs in member countries. Leveraging expertise, infrastructure and experience across the region is key to achieving these developmental goals and meeting national needs.

Training and capability building — in ICT as well as other disciplines — needs to be supported through greater government investment. It is critical, however, that trained and skilled workers then remain in the Pacific.

Any incentives or investment to support capability building must, therefore, be designed to retain skills and resources in the Pacific. Australia-to-Pacific mobility for teachers, academics and support staff to support Pacific expertise in capability-building, such as described in the IRU–USP proposal, will offer practical solutions to meet this challenge while easing the pressure on the Pacific skills base and workforce.

Pacific cultural heritage

A comprehensive understanding of Pacific cultural heritage adds complementary perspectives to better understand the challenges facing the region. It enhances people-to-people links and creates a solid cultural foundation for greater understanding between the many and diverse nations of the region.

Pacific policymakers use this cultural awareness to develop unique approaches and to seize opportunities that benefit the Pacific community. The diverse regional cultural heritage extant in the Pacific connects Pacific Island communities and assists them to develop and create their own conceptual frameworks and juxtapose them with other knowledge systems that are applied to Pacific cultural and societal issues.

While institutions such as USP and the PIURN play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage in the Pacific, Australia would benefit from a deeper, first-hand understanding of the diversity and depth of Pacific Island cultural heritage to better inform Pacific engagement strategies. This highlights the critical role that Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) disciplines bring to deepening Australians' understanding of the region and its cultures, through opportunities that target researchers in these fields to engage with and, importantly, *in* the Pacific. It also connects to the work of our universities to strengthen their partnerships with Pasifika communities in Australia – for example the work undertaken by Griffith University ([link](#)) and Western Sydney University.

While IRU recognises the existing partnership between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the University of the South Pacific (USP), greater government support for broadening academic and research partnerships in the Pacific will deliver better outcomes for the Pacific–Australian relationship.

The joint IRU–USP proposal for Pacific mobility provides an opportunity for Australia to field test a co-designed capability-building mobility program in the Pacific that, with the appropriate Federal support, could be scaled up over time to better meet regional priorities and objectives.

The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific

Central to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent — a product of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) — is “engaging in strategically beneficial partnerships at the regional, multilateral and global level.”

The terms of reference for this inquiry are substantially addressed by the Blue Pacific Continent Strategy and having it at the centre of engagement in the Pacific will be key to Australia's response to the priorities in the region.

The recent *Draft International Education and Skills Strategic Framework* acknowledges the key role education plays to “address shared priorities such as climate, economic, and security challenges” in our region. It goes on to describe how international education and training “significantly contribute to the Pacific's social and economic development” and outlines Australia's support for the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) “to promote education benefits like economic development and climate resilience”. The IRU welcomes this acknowledgement but believes a greater focus on the Pacific within Australia's international education policy strategy would enable a sharper focus on Pacific priorities and opportunities.

The Global Science and Technology Diplomacy Fund administered under the Department of Industry, Science and Resources, does not include collaboration with partners the Pacific. The IRU sees this as a shortcoming and would welcome greater emphasis in this program to drive innovative solutions in the region.

There is further scope for education, research collaboration and administrative capability building with Pacific Island partners and a coordinated and expanded engagement with groups such as the Pacific Islands Universities Research Network (PIURN) would facilitate this.

As set out in the *IRU Strategy 2022-27*, we believe that expanding collaborative education and research programs in the Pacific will enable Australia to build the expertise and deep people-to-people links necessary to achieve Pacific Island and Australian strategic priorities.

Geo-politics and Australia as the partner of choice

The *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific* describes the peace and security situation in the Pacific as follows:

“The regional security environment is becoming increasingly crowded and complex due to multifaceted security challenges and a dynamic geopolitical environment.

“The long-standing security threats emanating from ongoing geopolitical and geostrategic positioning by major powers in the region are impacting regional politics and security considerations.”

Australia’s aspirations to become the partner of choice for Pacific Island nations, therefore, must be viewed both from the context of individual as well as collective arrangements with Pacific Island leaders.

Pacific Island leaders demand a flexible and agile regional security and emergency management framework. They seek solutions that promote peace and ensure the Pacific can affect both traditional and non-traditional regional security issues. Key to this is embracing national sovereignty and strengthening the ability of individual communities and nations to realise their potential and deliver responses to regional and global security challenges.

The IRU believes that a deeper understanding of regional geopolitical, security and emergency management issues in the Pacific comes from deeper people-to-people links, such as are provided by equal and complementary research partnerships.

While the focus of these partnerships has traditionally been to bring Pacific scholars, leaders and government officials to Australia, the IRU believes this approach limits a deeper understanding of regional strengths, opportunities and weaknesses and restricts the co-design opportunities provided by mobility *into* the Pacific.

An embedded approach to engagement would enhance Australia’s diplomatic mission with the region and produce outcomes that are more readily coordinated with both Australian and Pacific Nations’ strategic and geopolitical objectives.

Conclusion

To constructively engage with the Pacific community, Australia must seek out and foster equal partnerships across the region, in support of self-determination, and a genuine desire to learn.

The IRU firmly believes that collaborative and equal partnerships are the cornerstone of this constructive engagement. The fostering of people-to-people links to solve regional issues is what underpins the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific* and, with the link to the priorities set out in the Sustainable Development Goals, Australia is well placed to strengthen its partnership with the Pacific.

The IRU-USP Australia-Pacific university mobility and collaboration initiative, proposes a co-designed program to boost staff mobility and research collaboration with USP and IRU-member universities. Unlike existing Australian Government schemes, this program would place Australian university staff in the Pacific to strengthen capability in the region and drive the next generation of Australia-Pacific links in higher education and research.

The aim of this initial four-year program is to provide proof-of-concept for a broader initiative in the future that could involve more Australian universities. We believe that there is still more that can be done to strengthen education and research partnerships in support of Pacific priorities.



June 2024

IRU Pacific Engagement

Overview

IRU universities have greater engagement with the Pacific than any other Australian university group.

Increased engagement with the Pacific, through increased support for staff and student exchanges, research collaboration, and the sharing of perspectives and best practice were identified as key commitments in the *IRU Strategy 2022-2027*

IRU member engagement in the region is focused on Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, with New Caledonia, Tonga, French Polynesia, Samoa and Kiribati also well represented. There are also strong partnerships with regional and sub-regional groups/programs.

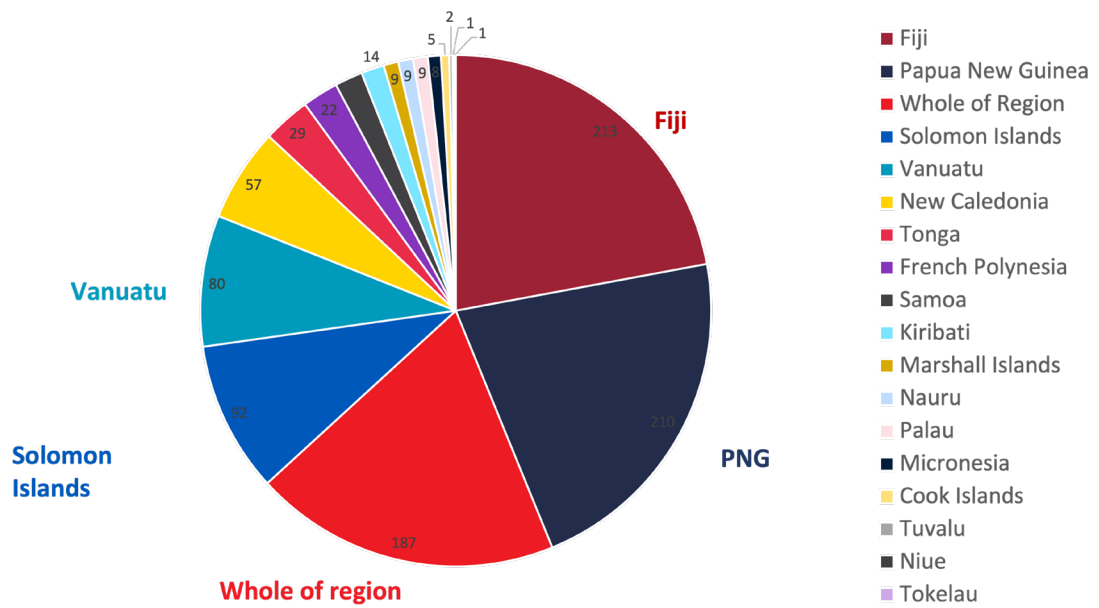


Figure 1: Network engagement across the Pacific by country. Data gathered by the Griffith Pacific Hub for the IRU Pacific engagement audit in 2023.

Mobility

IRU universities have been active participants in New Colombo Plan activities in the Pacific with 12 scholars and more than 140 mobility programs (approx. 1,200 students) in recent years. Additional students travel to the Pacific on study tours and direct partnerships. Members also host Australia Awards students, with the University of Canberra offering a dedicated course for program participants.

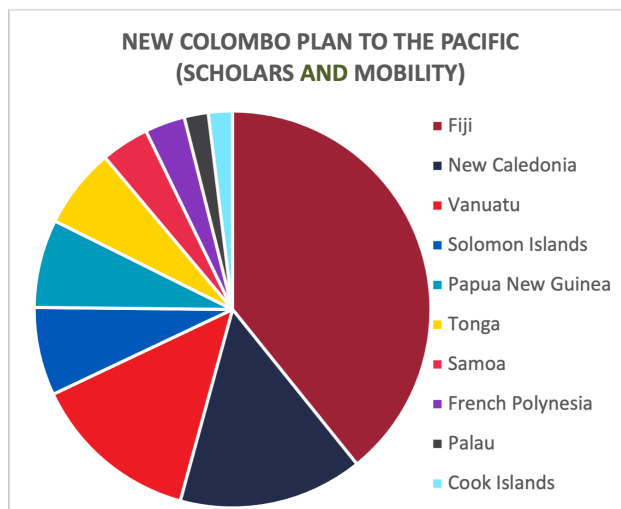


Figure 2: Mapping of IRU NCP scholars and mobility programs in the Pacific. Data gathered by the Griffith Pacific Hub for the IRU Pacific engagement audit in 2023.

Research

The top fields of research collaboration between IRU members and Pacific universities over the last decade are agriculture, medical research, environmental sciences and social sciences. Equity and inclusion, including gender equity, are also top priorities.

When mapped against the Pacific Islands Forum's *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, IRU members' engagement is strongest in people-centred development, followed by oceans and natural environment, and resources and economic development.

Partnerships

In September 2023, the IRU signed a new partnership MoU with the University of the South Pacific (USP), to increase staff mobility and collaboration on PhD and research programs. Climate change, education and healthcare were nominated as immediate priorities.

In its 2024-25 pre-Budget submission, the IRU outlined a proposal to co-design and lead a program to boost staff mobility, innovative teaching and learning, research collaboration and administrative capability building with universities in the Pacific. The program, developed in conjunction with the USP, would place Australian academics and professionals in Pacific universities, strengthen institutions, build research capability in the region, and drive the next generation of Australia–Pacific links in higher education and research.