

**The Role of Higher Education in Regional Development
in Pacific Island Countries with Specific Reference to the
University of the South Pacific**

K.H. Thaman

*Presented at the Regional Seminar “Competition, Cooperation and Change
in the Academic Profession: Shaping Higher Education’s
Contribution to Knowledge and Research”*

18-19 September 2007
Hangzhou, China



THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES with specific reference to the University of the South Pacific

Konai H Thaman

Introduction

Perspectives of the role of higher education in 'regional development' vary often depending on the way a 'region' is defined. In Australia, for example, Garlick discusses three types of relationships between higher education institutions and their region. A structuralist perspective refers to situations in which higher education institutions are seen as economic boosters in rural areas, while a spatial perspective is associated with equity measures such as student placement, usually based on distance from metropolitan centres. A 'third stream' perspective is based on a recognition of the significance of a region to the higher education institutions that are located there (Garlick, 2005).

What the literature says

According to Arbo (2005), the literature on higher education institutions and their role in regional development seems to be centred around four basic themes, namely, i) the notion of centrality of a university; ii) its meaning and purpose; iii) its mission and operation; and, iv) its innovation agenda and new modes of governance. Higher education institutions have always had an impact on their 'region': as well as producing trained and educated manpower, university research and innovations are often seen as engines of growth and regional development. However, while some developed countries the role of community outreach was often seen as an added task, in many developing countries, community outreach is a central task and is often integrated into the research and teaching functions of the institution. Nowadays, many higher education institutions have a multitude of new outreach functions, including interfaces and other initiatives, (such as centres of this and that; science/business/research parks/ incubators/career centres/distance and flexible learning/ regional service centres; entrepreneurship; regional

development strategies; partnership agreements etc.) – all reflecting the role of the institution in the development of its constituent areas. In fact, as Arbo concludes, “ few other institutions are so deeply involved with their regions (Arbo, 2005:15).

Debates and discussions relation to the role of higher education institutions in regional development also raise issues such as institutional fragmentation; un-intended outcomes, the role of key individuals, local initiatives and informal networks; regularity (or otherwise) of faculty involvement; impact of funding systems on regional engagement; competition and division of labour between higher education institutions; weak academic leadership; ambiguity of role definition; and ambivalence of staff towards fulfilling that role (Arbo, 2005).

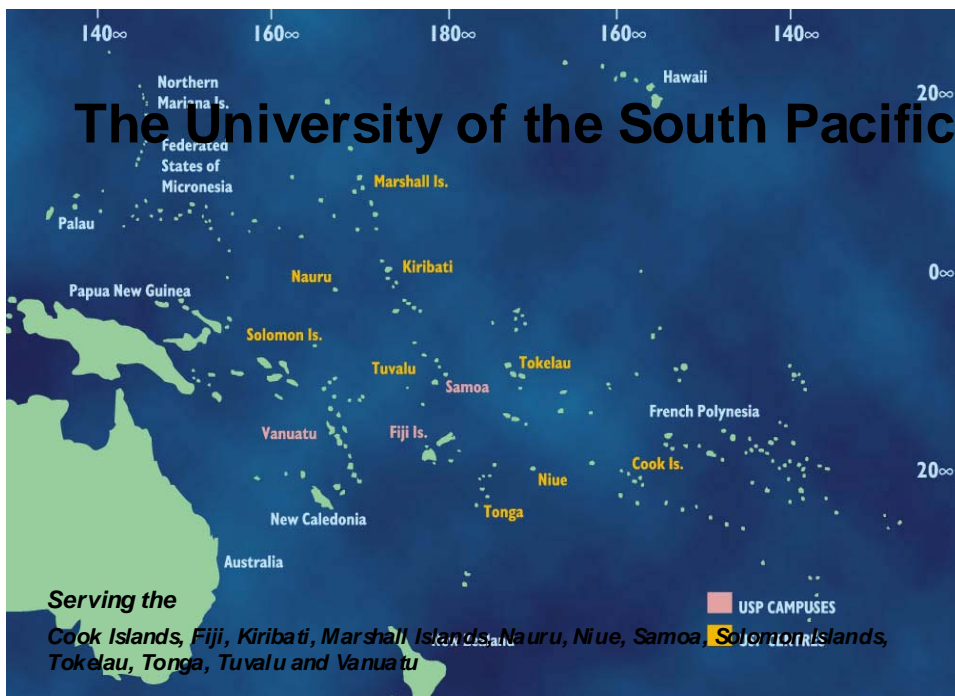
In many developed countries the apparent differences in the way institutions work with one another seem to depend on whether they are comprehensive or specialized universities, public or private, old or new; urban or rural; local or regional; centralized or devolved (governance); general or research-oriented. Different institutions respond differently to changing circumstances, as many display a variety of ‘capitalisms’. In relation to best practice in regional partnership development, we learn that there does not seem to be any one ideal way to develop partnerships between higher education and regional development agencies although there seems to be some general requirements for successful operation. These include: legitimate & identifiable partners; acknowledgement of different institutional contexts; mutual recognition & respect; shared basic understanding; regional identity & feeling of obligation; crisis background or perceived common external threat; complementarities; available resources; room of maneuver; leadership role & procedural routines; agenda setting & structuring of attention; actor mobilization and participatory structures.

In terms of outcomes of regional development in which higher education institutions are involved, Arbo identifies four regional trajectories, at least for developed countries, namely: a dynamic interacting and learning region with increasing governance capacity; a region with flourishing industry and/or universities but without important (regional)

links; a region with close cooperation between industry, higher education and government, but locked-in and losing out; and, a failing and un-coordinated region.

This paper will focus on the University of the South Pacific (USP), a regional university with a mandate to 'serve' its region, twelve Pacific Island Countries (PICs). USP displays most of the features referred to above, particularly those features that Arbo says are necessary for successful operation. One additional feature that in my view has been a major factor in USP's continual growth and success is its ability to be proactive and adapt to changes, not only within the region that it serves but also globally. This is most evident in its early adoption of satellite and new information technologies to assist it to deliver higher education to a geographically fragmented region and isolated region.

The University of the South Pacific (USP): a case study



If 'region' is defined in terms of a collection of different countries or nation states, then USP would be one of only two functional 'regional' universities in the world (the other being the University of the West Indies). From its establishment in 1968, USP has had the mandate to serve its member countries (initially eleven now twelve), the small Pacific

Island states of Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, collectively referred to as the USP region - a sea of islands whose geographic spread is about three times the size of Europe but with a total population of only one and half million people. USP's services its region through its four main functions of: teaching, research, consultancies and community outreach. In the Report of a Higher Education Mission to the South Pacific (which resulted in the establishment of USP), Sir Charles Morris wrote: 'In our conception of such a (regional) university we have in our minds two main principles . . . the first is that in the whole field of higher education . . . , the highest quality must be ensured in teaching and in student achievement. The second is that all courses of instruction, both for degrees and diplomas, must be so designed as to take well into account both the interests and aptitudes of the students of the Region and the circumstances and needs of the countries concerned (Morris, et al, 1966:65). As far as I know, USP has always tried to live up to these expectations despite major and often dramatic changes in the political landscapes as well as the economies of its member countries.

A feature of USP governance has been its close relationship with member governments. Each government is represented in the USP's governing Council by its Minister of Education. Over the years, University Centres (now campuses) have been established in all member countries, to facilitate the delivery of extension/distance education programs and to be the 'face' of the university in these places. These Centres were also expected to offer appropriate continuing education programs (in appropriate areas of need in each country) and to respond quickly to training needs that did not involve credit-earning study.

USP consisted of Schools, appropriately named to reflect the manpower philosophy of the university: Natural Resources; Social and Economic Development; Education; Agriculture; and later Law. While Schools consisting of various departments were responsible largely for the teaching functions of the university, a series of Institutes were established early tasked with responding quickly to member countries' requests for

assistance often involving not only training but also research and consultancy activities. Institutes were funded mainly from regional (donor-funded) projects and were linked to and often depended upon the academic staff of Schools for project implementation. For example, the Institute of Education (IOE) was/is closely linked to the School of Education, and together they were/are largely responsible for the delivery of regional educational services to member countries. In the mid 1990s in keeping with an international trend for universities to get into the money making business, a 'business arm' of USP was established. Called USP Solution, it was tasked with negotiating of behalf of university staff and sections, who were involved in major consultancy services. Unfortunately USP Solutions encountered management problems, and it came to be seen as competing with existing Institutes who had already established reputations in the region, for research and consultancy services and was closed in 2006.

USP has had a very international staff. During the 1970s and 80s, most academic staff were expatriates, mainly from the U.K., U.S., Australia and New Zealand. This pattern has changed over the years and while the proportion of expatriate and regional staff (persons who are citizens of member countries) was 60/40 in the mid 1980s, the picture today is 40/60 in favour of regional staff, mainly from Fiji. USP does not have an academic tenured system; instead, all academic staff are on renewable three year contracts, with multiple renewals depending on performance. The majority of the University's general staff are citizens of the countries in which they work and they are hired on a permanent basis.

The Futures Report

By 2000 the USP's governing Council (whose members include the Ministers of Education of member countries, four non-government representatives, two USP alumni representatives, representatives of other regional organizations, four professorial representatives, two non-professorial staff representatives, and members of Senior Management) decided that it was again time for stakeholders to reflect upon and review the work of the USP. A sub-committee of Council chaired by the Pro Chancellor

conducted a series of consultations with member governments, major stakeholder communities as well as different donor and international agencies. Entitled ‘A Regional University of Excellence: weaving past and present for the future’ (commonly referred to as the Futures Report), this report provided the main guiding principles for USP’s further development, providing the opportunity that exists for the university to become even more widely recognised as a regional institution with academic distinction in key areas where both itself as well as its region have a competitive advantage” (Triennium Submission (TS) 2007-2009:1).

The Futures Report also reconfirms the role of USP in the Pacific Region by stating that, “higher education is a critical element not only because it provides essential support for the holistic education system but because it is vital for capacity building and socio-economic development in an increasingly globalised Pacific”(TS:12). Consequently, the vision of the USP is to strive to:

- Be Pacific centre of excellence in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom in the service of Pacific communities
- Enhance Pacific people’s capability to lead free and worthwhile lives
- Provide the foundation for Pacific peoples to be proud of their heritage and take pride in creating their future, the heritage for the next generation
- Be an active partner in the social, economic and political development of its region (member countries)

Two themes have always been important for USP since its inception and they also underlie the Futures Report – they are Relevance and Quality. Relevance relates to the services that USP provides for the governments and people of the Region, and Quality is seen a philosophy of continuous self reflection and self assessment which needs to underpin all of universities processes and activities. Relevance and Quality are important yardsticks that have been used to measure the university’s activities and they continue to be the main guiding principles for the university’s current Strategic Plan 2006-2011 that sets out the broad areas of focus for university activities in the next five years, namely:

teaching and learning; research; student and staff support; constituent and external relations; governance, administration and management.

The USP environment

The political environment in which USP operated during the first ten years of its life was quite different from what it is now. When USP opened its doors (in Fiji) I 1968, only the kingdom of Tonga and) Western Samoa were independent nations. Now, only Tokelau is not fully independent (it is a protectorate of New Zealand). One of the main reasons for the establishment of USP was to prepare Pacific people for independence. Over the years, the university has produced a cadre of graduates who have taken up important leadership positions (in member countries and regional organizations) in different capacities, in a variety of fields, including in government, business, and education. The fact that the university continues to exist and fully supported by member governments is itself testimony to their continuing need for its services. Other features of USP that make it an interesting place to work and study include its wide geographical spread (three times the size of Europe); its cultural and linguistic diversity; its long experience in the use of distance and flexible learning; its long association with, and early adoption of, satellite communication technologies (USPNet) for use in teaching and administration; and its mix of regional and international students and staff in its campuses throughout the Region. These factors combine to create an institution with special strengths as well as challenges as it strives to serve the needs and interests of twelve different governments, over five hundred different cultural and linguistic groups as well as one and half million people.

Like many higher education institutions elsewhere, USP came into being at a time of rapid change, political as well as economic. The impact of globalization on member countries has been felt by the University. A World Bank Report in 2002, entitled *Constructing Knowledge Societies: new challenges for tertiary education*) had warned about new trends in the global environment that were impacting the shape and mode of operation of tertiary education systems especially in developing countries. Despite its

unique clientele and mode of governance as a regional university, USP faces similar challenges to those identified in the WB Report, especially those challenges related to the need to expand tertiary education in a sustainable way; inequalities of access and outcomes for some groups of students; problems of educational quality and relevance; and rigid governance structures and management practices.

These challenges are more real in a region where higher education has been highly selective and elitist. Less than five percent of high school leavers in most member countries go to university. More recently, however, an increasing proportion of school leavers are meeting admission requirements and seeking admittance to USP either through scholarships or privately. Pacific Island leaders expect more of their young people to receive a university education and have opted to work together to produce a vision for their respective futures. The **Pacific Plan (PP)** is a blueprint for their collective vision, expectations and future development and USP is expected to play its part in the implementation of the PP. As the largest regional organisation in Oceania, and an active member of the Pacific Plan Task Force, USP will have a leading role especially in areas such as human resource development; education; governance; sport; information and communication technologies; and education for sustainable development.

As well as a major player in the Regional Task Force, USP has also been identified as a major collaborating agency for other areas of PP including: Environment and Sustainable issues, Marine resources, Leadership, Business, Economics, Research, and Education for Sustainable Development. In relation to this last area, USP is the lead regional institution for DESD and was named in 2006 as a UNESCO Regional Centre of Excellence for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). It currently works closely with the Asian Pacific Centre for Cultural Understanding (ACCU) in Japan to implement a number of projects in the area of ESD. A series of lectures talks and preparation of awareness material on PP are currently underway, organized and/or sponsored by various sections of the university while the Planning and Development

Offices continues to liaise with the Secretariat of the Pacific Forum regarding implementation aspects of the PP.

Contribution to Regionalism

An underlying assumption of the PP is that regionalism is the best tool for enhancing and stimulating economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security of Pacific Island Countries (PICs). Many of the PP's strategic objectives closely align with current USP activities such as (new) programs in governance; environment and sustainable development; Pacific studies, culture and heritage; labor markets and economic analyses; information and communication technologies; policing and human security; sport; and gender studies.

Pacific regionalism is based on features such as shared geographies; similar (colonial) histories and postcolonial experiences. These have largely contributed towards the fostering of a regional consciousness and regional cooperation as a means of tackling common problems and finding regional solutions for such problems. However, there are other regional organizations that exemplify regional cooperation by governments and people of the small island nations of the Pacific Ocean. Apart from USP there are: the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC); South Pacific Applied Geo-Science Commission (SOPAC); South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA) and South Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP) – each specializing in specific tasks. Regional cooperation is also demonstrated through religious based structures (e.g. Pacific Council of Churches), and non-government organization. USP work closely with these other organizations and together they provide a pool of resources and expertise from which PICs can draw. As the largest regional organization in the Pacific, USP is also regarded by many member states as well as financial donors agencies as an important facilitator and contributor to the development of a regional consciousness, as well as a positive force for regional cohesion: as Irvine (2006:10) puts it, “USP is a place for the meeting of minds of persons from different countries as well as a transmitter of the social and

cultural values of the region (Irvine, quoted in the USP SP 2007-2009:10). The USP management on the other hand regards regionalism as providing a shared platform for human resource development in which USP continues to play a very important role.

As well as HRD, USP provides other benefits to its member countries. Firstly USP is a positive force for regional interaction and cohesion. Students from all over the region go to USP campuses and develop friendships, common educational experiences and greater understanding of their different backgrounds; many are later employed in public services, schools, private enterprises and they take with them their new knowledge which they impart to others. This is clearly evident in the area of the Arts which there is a merging of different national practices into new and vibrant expressions of music, dance, literature and visual art (TS:11) This is not necessarily the case with many national institutions.

Secondly, because of its size and breadth, USP is a centre of excellence for the region, a fact that was recently strengthened with the award to it of the status of Regional Centre of Excellence for DESD by the Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU). USP has the critical mass that national institutions are not able to achieve. This critical mass enables it to offer a wide range of programs and undertake research on a scale that smaller national institutions would find difficult. Size and representativeness also enables it to attract external funding for its recurrent budget, research and infrastructure. Financial donors often prefer a body with regional coverage rather than funding a number of smaller national institutions as it makes more effective use of scarce resources. Countries such as Australia and New Zealand also recognize the benefits to their own national interests of strengthening regional capacity through USP. This critical mass also enables USP to compete more effectively with external universities especially in the provision of tertiary studies. USP has a growing reputation as a provider of consultancy services, as an important regional capacity builder and a centre of strategic regional alliances with governments, regional bodies, NGOs, and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) regional bodies and international agencies (USPTS, 2006).

Finally, a regional university, USP provides member countries with considerable savings. It is estimated that USP currently costs its member governments approximately 55 million Fiji dollars a year. Sending the same number of students to universities outside the region would cost at least 125 million Fiji dollars – a relative increase of over 50%. This is a saving in both costs and foreign exchange. Students also succeed better at USP because they face fewer cultural adjustments, and almost all students return home after graduating, which is not the case with most Pacific students graduating from neighbouring Australian and New Zealand universities. Other financial benefits to member countries include taxes that USP staff pays in the various countries in which they work, and the growth of industries that service and feed USP students who live in university accommodation and facilities. In many respects, there is no other education or other institution that is comparable to USP in terms of its scope, depth, and positive contribution to the Pacific region.

Major Challenges

While regionalism can be a positive trend, it brings with it many challenges. Many ordinary Pacific islanders do not normally see themselves as members of a region. Rather they consider village and national identities more important (DS, 2005:14). This means that a lot of awareness raising activities about the benefits of USP to the region continues to be important for the university, especially in those member countries where there is increasing competition for students from entrepreneurial Australian and New Zealand universities.

Another challenge relates to the fact that PICs are not economically tied to each other in the way that members of the European Union for example, are. It has been suggested by some observers that Pacific states need to work harder at maintaining consensus among stakeholders because the benefits of regional cooperation are not always clear to people both at government level as well as the grassroots level. However, in my view, a regional consciousness is more marked today compared to thirty years ago, and recent work conducted by USP has shown that while regional affinity was not very strong among

stakeholders, it was not as weak as might have been expected (Development Studies, 2005:12). I believe that USP has contributed positively to the development of a regional consciousness.

Another challenge that USP faces has to do with the question of sustainability of a rapidly expanding institution. From a few hundred students in the 1970s, there are now over 20,000 students enrolled with an annual growth rate of around 7% per annum in the last five years. The exponential growth in student numbers is putting a lot of pressure on existing services & infrastructure, resulting in a large percentage decrease in the amount of funding available per student. This will undoubtedly undermine quality. Overcrowded classrooms, heavy staff workload, deteriorating facilities, cramped office spaces and aging equipment are evident of the need to control student enrolment. The services of a consultant has been sought to work on an optimum student enrolment profile for USP and to compile data on pass and retention rates so that strategies can be found for affected groups and individuals. Despite continuing support from member governments for funding the university's recurrent budget (of around F\$75 million), this is not adequate and the university continues to look elsewhere for additional sources of funding, including from its major donors, the governments of Australia and New Zealand who are also members of the Pacific Forum Countries. However, such funds are usually meant for specific purposes, such as development of infrastructure and research rather than core funding.

Addressing the challenges

One way of addressing the many challenges faced by USP was a decision by the USP Council based on the Futures Report, to undergo a restructuring. Major changes to the configuration of academic sections occurred in 2005 that involved the establishment of new Faculties and the appointment of additional senior managers, such as Deans and Associated Deans to oversee the new grouping of previously existing departments and schools. This process has been controversial and costly to put it mildly, and in July 2007,

university Senate agreed to form a sub-committee to look into the impact of restructuring not only on university finances but also on the quality of academic programs.

It has become obvious that USP can longer be all things to all people. The success of USP as a regional institution is probably its main strength as well as its main weakness. Unbridled growth in student numbers has far outstripped the financial resources available to it, and USP's ability to adequately support staff and students with proper facilities and resources has been compromised. For example, in real terms the amount of money per student, in the recurrent budget amounts to only 60% of what it was ten years ago, while the total funding per student is less than 50% on average compared to that in Australia and New Zealand.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that USP has done its region proud and will continue to do so in the future. However, the path towards fostering greater regional cohesion and cooperation through graduates who not only have the ability to analyse and debate the socio-political choices of the day but who carry a vision and a responsibility for creating a better tomorrow for PICs requires a sustained level of commitment as well as difficult decisions. The university now needs to carefully manage enrolment and raise the standards and expectations of both faculty and students. It must also continue to invest in ethical and committed leadership, accountable to the people of the countries that send students to the university. Regional governments also need to recognize the importance of investing in equipment and infrastructure necessary for creating positive and productive learning environments for students, and commit more funds for applied research capacity in strategic areas.

USP may not in future be able to afford to accept everyone who is qualified to enter; make do with little or no additional resources for maintenance & infrastructural development; make do with few or no incentives for recruitment and retention of quality staff, especially Pacific Island staff; and allow personal research agendas and priorities to

outweigh strategic, regional ones. USP needs stronger support and commitment from all member countries as well as external partners in order to continue to be the premier higher education institution of the Pacific region in the future.

References used

Arbo, P. 2005. What the literature tell us. Paper presented at international seminar, Karlstad Uni., Sweden, Oct.4-5. <https://www.intra.kau.se/document>.

Development Studies/PIAS-DG. Strengthening regional cooperation through enhanced engagement with civil society. A Project Report, USP, Suva.

Duke, C. 2005. The role of higher education institutions in regional development: a report on an international seminar held at Karlstad Uni., Sweden, Oct 4-5. <https://www.virtuallythere.com/new/reservationsChron.html>

Garlick, S. 2005. The role of higher education institutions in regional development – the case of Australia. Paper presented at a seminar at Karlstad Uni., Sweden. <https://www.oecd/longabstract/>.

The University of the South Pacific Planning and Development Office. 2006. *Triennial Submission 2007-2009*. USP, Suva.

Development Studies, USP. 2005. Strengthening Regional Cooperation through enhanced engagement with civil society. Project Report, Development Studies/PIAS-DG, USP, Suva.