

Commercial Activity in Pacific Education

A SCOPING STUDY: SUMMARY



This study collected scoping data to document and understand the extent of privatisation and commercialisation of education in eight Council of Pacific Education (COPE) nations - the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The study recruited participants from these nations to provide a preliminary understanding of education reform in COPE-affiliated systems and schools, and the impact this has on schools' and teachers' work.

This scoping research identifies that, like many jurisdictions around the world, COPE nations are embarking on significant reforms to their education sector. Also, like many nations that embark on education reform agendas, the impact and consequences of these reforms often remain hidden. What this report demonstrates is that the reformist zeal that Sahlberg (2011) identified as the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) is impacting schooling in the Pacific Islands, albeit within the unique context of each nation. Sahlberg (2011) identifies six features of education reform principles that have been employed to try and improve the quality of education. Each of these are discussed in relation to the Pacific Islands.

1. Standardisation: centrally prescribed curricula and testing

Standardisation of and in education. Like elsewhere in the world, **COPE nations seem to now focus on education outcomes, as evidenced by centrally prescribed curricula and testing of students.** Further research is required on how each system is designing and delivering their curriculum and how they access resources for teaching and learning.

2. Increased focus on literacy and numeracy: EQAP

An increased focus on literacy and numeracy where skills in reading and mathematics become central to education reform strategies potentially at the expense of a broad curriculum. Sahlberg (2011) argues that this focus is mostly due to the acceptance of large-scale



international student assessments like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as these tend to determine perceived success of students, teachers, schools and entire school systems. Currently, Pacific Island nations do not undertake PISA, nor do they sign up for PISA for Development. Yet, **the establishment of the Education Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP)**, "mandated to develop education quality in the Pacific" whose "efforts are dedicated to literacy and numeracy, assessment, curriculum development, qualifications accreditation and research" (EQAP, 2019) **suggests that education in the Pacific Islands is still turning its focus towards greater literacy and numeracy in schooling undermining a broad curriculum.** EQAP supported financially by the Australian Government, New Zealand Aid Programme and UNESCO, is a programme within the Pacific Community (SPC) – an international development organisation owned and governed by its 26 country and territory members – and is also a member and represents the Pacific in the steering group of the Network on Education Quality Monitoring in the Asia-Pacific region (NEQMAO) – an initiative run by UNESCO. Currently, EQAP conducts the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA), and also provides a range of support, advice and services around leadership, policy, assessment, curriculum, teaching and learning, qualifications recognition, and ICTs. For example, with ICTs, EQAP provides custom built applications, consultancy services and software (including applications that help with administration, assessment, analysis). All these activities suggest **there is global influence on COPE education systems, and a move towards further standardisation across these systems.** The role of EQAP and national legislation shifts into the future should be followed.

3. Teach to predetermined results: teachers feel they lack training

Teaching to predetermined results which Sahlberg (2011) defines as searching for "safe and low-risk ways to reach learning goals" that "minimize[s] experimentation" and "reduces the use of alternative pedagogical approaches" (p.178). He makes the point that experimentation is necessary for creativity and innovation in schools, and without this freedom teachers can feel de-professionalised. This project did not collect data that would suggest teachers are constrained in pedagogical innovation, however **teachers felt they lacked the skills and training to design and implement innovative pedagogies.** Throughout the survey participants reflected that they needed further training in behaviour management strategies and inclusive pedagogies. Some interview participants in Fiji observed that there was some pressure to teach to the test given the recent change in examinations and suggested that this is worth exploring further on a system level across COPE nations.

4. Transfer of innovation: short-term teacher contracts and unknown role of philanthropy

The *transfer of innovation from corporate to the educational world* where education policy and ideas are borrowed from the private sector. Sahlberg argues that ideas bought in from outside the educational system undermine elements of successful reform, particularly in relation to the enhancement of an education system's own capability to maintain renewal. Perhaps the most striking issue in this regard is **the use of short-term contracts for teachers throughout the Pacific Islands.** This is a policy informed by New Public Management (NPM) which is a business-style managerialism that aims to render the public service more effective (Clarke, 2004). As Christensen and Laegreid (2007) assert, the assumption of NPM is that market-oriented management will lead to greater cost efficiency and improved success for governments. In the case of Fiji, for example, the Ministry believes that placing teachers on contracts is a way to drive up

education training and qualifications which is in the best interest of students and the school system more broadly. Despite this intention, **participants in this project clearly identified that short term contracts were detrimental to their performance, citing issues of professionalism, wellbeing and reduced likelihood to attract and retain teachers in the profession.** There is an issue with under-qualified teachers in COPE nations, but further investigation is necessary in ascertaining how best to address this issue in a way that recognises the distinct challenges faced in the Pacific Islands and that works productively with teachers and school systems to address the needs for further training.

The other point Sahlberg (2011) makes with the increasing privatisation of education is that these reforms are often driven by international development organisations and private venture philanthropy as they “look for general remedies to poorly succeeding education reform movements” (p.178). While participants in this research made some reference to international organisations and aid agencies involved in their education systems **it seems necessary to further investigate the role and influence of philanthropy in COPE systems.** Philanthropic involvement and influence changes in intensity across different nations as the tax status and public expenditure available for education changes.

5. Test-based accountability policies: punitive teacher policies

The adoption of *test-based accountability policies* in which school performance and raising student outcomes is linked to accrediting, inspecting and ultimately, rewarding or punishing schools. Again, this feature does not seem as apparent in the Pacific Islands. It appears that more **focus is being cast on the teacher workforce – and seeking to punitively improve this – before attention is turned to schools.** This is partly due to the lack of a standardised test that ranks the quality of schools, and partly due

to the well-recognised problem of under-qualified teachers. As the OECD (2014) argues, a high-quality teaching profession is vital in ensuring high-quality student outcomes. Thus, in the Pacific Islands it seems that the focus on improving the system-wide accreditation of teachers is through their qualifications and training and subsequently rewarding (contract extension and improved pay) or pushing them into compliance (one year contract).

6. Increased control of schools: strict teacher accountability

The *increased control of schools* in which there is a drive to collect data to identify and target low-performing schools. It appears more focus is directed at auditing and evaluating the skills of teachers and **policies have sought to increase control of teachers and place them under stricter accountability mechanisms.** Further research is required in understanding assessment policies and related accountability policies at the system level of all COPE nations.

GERM has clearly had consequences for teachers' work in the Pacific Islands. On the one hand, it has been able to emphasise some guidelines to improve the quality and effectiveness of education systems, including access to schooling for students, putting more focus on curriculum and assessment for learning and strengthening the training of the teacher workforce. However, on the other hand, **it has strengthened logics of privatisation that assume explicit targets for teachers (and students in the case of PILNA) are the most effective way to improve COPE educational systems.**

Suggestions for further research

The following areas are worthy of further research so as to better understand the elements (and related components) of school provision in the Pacific:

Control

1. Assess the impact of short-term contracts on the interrelated domains of access, equity and quality of education and the morale, status and conditions of the teaching profession.
2. Evaluate terms of school regulation (for non-government and private schools in particular) and consequential effects on student outcomes and teacher professionalism.
3. Explore avenues for creating more effective consultative processes between education stakeholders, particularly government departments, unions and school personnel.

Funding

4. Establish how aid money is being used in education, and the extent to which it influences national education system policies and/or individual school practices.
5. Establish how school funding arrangements work in nations of the Pacific Islands, including public funding (e.g. taxation), private income (e.g. fees and parental contributions) and philanthropy (e.g. aid money).
6. Explore how schools engage in philanthropic arrangements to meet a perceived shortfall in infrastructure and resourcing.

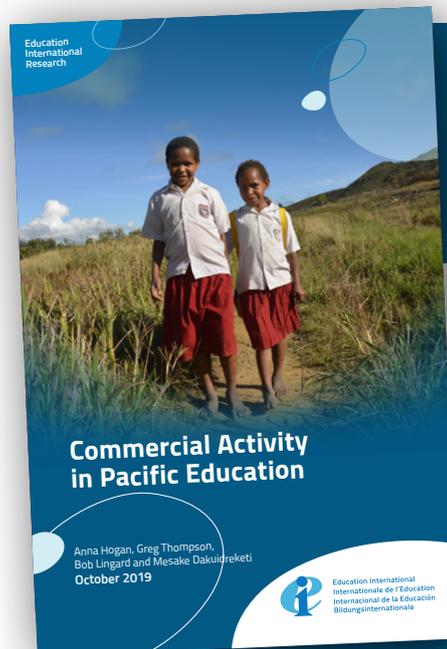
Access

7. Assess the impact of curriculum and assessment reforms, particularly in terms of cultural appropriation, uptake and effectiveness.
8. Establish the prominence of school choice and school competition and evaluate what information and resources parents are using to inform their decisions.

9. Explain the relationship between Early Childhood Education and education privatisation.
10. Evaluate opportunities for further use of ICTs at all levels of the education system.

Teaching

11. Establish the reasons why some teachers are not accessing further qualifications and training (despite this being a condition of their contract renewal).
12. Explore opportunities for broad stakeholder collaboration in the design and enactment of continuing professional learning for teachers and school leaders.
13. Evaluate the current post-secondary pathways for teacher training/qualifications and how these might better support the needs of future teachers.
14. Understand wellbeing issues for teachers and the support structures required to enhance their professionalism.



The full research paper by Anna Hogan, Greg Thompson, Bob Lingard and Mesake Dakuidreketi can be found here: <https://go.ei-ie.org/GRPacific>



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