The role of TVET in Pacific secondary schools: new visions, new pathways

Chapter 1: Introduction – new visions, new pathways

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On my first visit to the Republic of Palau in April 2004, I was taken on a tour of Palau High School by Raynold Mechol, one of the senior staff of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry had put the visit right at the top of my agenda and I was curious why it had been given such priority.

Located on the main road in the heart of downtown Koror, the school is typical of many in the Pacific: a mixture of older and newer buildings, a miscellany of architectural styles, grounds that show the wear and tear of constant use—just an ordinary secondary school, or so it seemed to me.

Raynold was a former principal of the school and as we made our way through the grounds he was greeted warmly by staff and students alike. In between these encounters he provided some basic information: ‘Students in Palau spend eight years in primary school, four in high school. This is the only government secondary school. It has an enrolment in excess of 800. The four years of high school are compulsory for all students.’

That last statement stopped me in my tracks: ‘You say that all of your students go all the way through secondary school? Schooling is compulsory to at least 17 years of age?’

‘That’s right,’ said Raynold, ‘But then our curriculum is not typical of other countries in the Pacific.’ By this time we had walked towards the back of the compound, where there were several rather ramshackle buildings that did not look like classrooms at all. He took me into one. It seemed more like a workshop for all things mechanical: outboard engines, cars, motor bikes, and so on. Several girls and boys were working on an old car, others on a noisy engine of some kind.

Raynold could sense that he had aroused my curiosity and began to explain: ‘All our students are required to enrol in a career academy. In addition to their academic subjects they choose one vocational pathway. These students are doing
mechanical engineering…’ He took me to the building next door. ‘… and these are doing construction technology, where they learn the basics of house building and furniture making.’

I stopped to chat with a couple of young women. Each was sanding down a desk in preparation for varnishing. The desks looked most impressive: substantial, well constructed, highly functional. They explained that they had made the desks themselves during the course of the semester and, once they were completed, the students would be taking them home, where they would put them to good use for study and homework.

As the tour continued we stopped at a small shop on the campus to buy ourselves a cold drink. I assumed it to be the usual school tuckshop, run by parents. No way. This was a business venture established by a group of students as part of their practical training for the tourism and hospitality course. They were responsible for everything: marketing, stock control, financial management and sales. We sat on a bench outside and, sipping our drinks, continued our conversation. I was curious: ‘What happens with your academically talented students who want to go on to university and study things like law, languages or literature? Are they required to enrol in a career academy?’

Raynold’s response was an unequivocal ‘Yes!’ He went on to explain that academic and vocational studies are not seen as alternatives, but as part of an integrated curriculum: ‘The academic and the vocational complement each other. The students who go on to university (in Guam or the USA), take with them a range of practical skills that help them find part-time jobs during their university years, as well as a range of very useful life-skills.’

Just then a couple of teachers came past to buy a drink and I was introduced. They were on their way to classes in one of the career academies. I was surprised to learn that they were not staff of the high school, but lecturers from the Palau Community College, a post-secondary institution. Again, Raynold came to the rescue by explaining that the Community College campus was right next door to the high school, and that staff of the college regularly helped as teachers in the career academies.
In talking with the two college lecturers, I learned that most students graduating from the high school had earned a full semester of credit that they could carry with them if they chose to continue their studies at the college. I was becoming more and more impressed!

But it did not finish there. I also discovered that the Ministry of Education and the Palau Employers Federation had a close working relationship, and that over one hundred employers had agreed to offer vacation employment to students. During the long summer holidays, all students who so wished could gain work experience in their chosen vocation. Most did. The work was full-time, and in 2004 students were paid a weekly income of $50. By the end of high school many had accumulated up to nine months of work experience in their chosen career.

After my tour and further conversations with Raynold and other staff of the Ministry of Education, I was convinced that I had experienced an approach to secondary education that was unique in the Pacific. Indeed, even in my own home country of Australia, I had never encountered a programme as innovative and visionary as the one at Palau High School.

My experience in Palau led me to explore other programmes of school-based TVET\(^1\) in the Pacific. I discovered that Fiji also was making significant progress in this area with a number of innovative programmes, especially in tourism. At a global level there was also increasing interest in the synergies between the academic and the vocational in secondary schools. This was especially apparent in the studies being undertaken by the UNESCO\(^2\) International Centre for TVET (UNEVOC) under the leadership of Dr Rupert Maclean.

The role of TVET in the Pacific

Within the PRIDE\(^3\) Project itself there has been an increasing focus on TVET, largely in response to discussions at Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat Education Ministers meetings, and at other high level gatherings of educators in the Pacific. One of the key roles of the PRIDE Project is to establish minimum benchmarks,

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1. Technical and vocational education and training
2. United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation
3. Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of basic Education
principles and criteria to apply to national strategic education plans. The benchmarks have been developed collaboratively by senior educators from all Pacific Forum countries, and are reviewed and modified regularly.

There are eleven benchmarks, ranked in order of priority by PRIDE national project coordinators. The second benchmark calls for education plans that promote skills for life and work locally, regionally and globally. A key underlying principle is that academic subjects are taught, ‘together with life and work preparation skills, within a balanced curriculum framework, to enable students to take their place, with ease and confidence, in their local communities, regional contexts, and the global world’ (www.usp.ac.fj/pride). One key indicator that a strategic plan is achieving this benchmark is a clear statement on strategies for the development of life and work preparation skills, including TVET programmes.

The sixth benchmark calls for a holistic approach to education, with effective articulation between each level, including the transition from secondary schooling to TVET. It also calls for articulation between education and the world of work, not only in the context of paid employment but also of self-sufficiency, self-reliance and self-employment. One indicator of a strategic plan achieving this benchmark is evidence of TVET-oriented programmes within the school curriculum. A second indicator is the presence of clear pathways between school and post-school programmes.

In light of the emerging significance of TVET in the Pacific, and the desire of Pacific educators for a more integrated and holistic approach, the PRIDE team recommended to its Steering Committee and the Ministers that TVET be the focus of one of its regional workshops. The recommendation received strong support.

Planning the workshop

During subsequent visits to Palau, I discussed the possibility of holding a PRIDE workshop on the role of TVET in secondary schools, using Palau High School as an on-site case study. The response was extremely positive. I also talked to colleagues in the Fiji Ministry of Education. They too responded with enthusiasm.

In planning the workshop programme, we decided to devote one full day to on-
site case studies of TVET provisions in Palau, including visits to Airai Elementary School where pre-vocational programmes were being offered to young children, Palau Secondary School and Palau Community College. The visits to these three institutions are described in Chapter 5. In addition, we invited the two largest countries in the Pacific, Papua New Guinea and Fiji, to showcase their approaches to the delivery of TVET in secondary schools through illustrated PowerPoint presentations. These case studies are presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

Our next step was to consult with Dr Rupert Maclean, with the aim of persuading him to allow UNEVOC to partner PRIDE in offering the workshop. He needed no persuasion! His response was immediate and positive. At the time I approached him, he and John Lauglo had just finished editing a book on the vocationalisation of secondary education (Lauglo & Maclean, 2005). The development of TVET programmes in secondary schools was an area of immediate and quite passionate interest to him, and he warmly welcomed the opportunity to share the ideas and resources of UNEVOC with Pacific educators.

Dr Maclean travelled from Bonn to attend the workshop. In the midst of his usual busy schedule he was able to spend a full week with us, giving three substantive keynote presentations. These are included as separate chapters in this book. They provide a clear overview of the current status and content of TVET in the secondary curriculum internationally, highlight key world issues and concerns, and foreshadow future directions for the provision of TVET in secondary schools.

A very strong and positive response also came from the Pacific Association of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (PATVET), the regional professional group of TVET educators. We are pleased to include in the book a keynote address, delivered by PATVET President Dr Perive Lene, which focuses on the articulation between secondary and post-secondary TVET programmes.

By the time the workshop took place in November 2006, there was growing interest throughout the Pacific in the role of vocational education in secondary schools, and Ministries/Departments of Education were keen to be involved. It was an exciting workshop, with UNEVOC, Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, PATVET and PRIDE working collaboratively.
The workshop methodology

This was a workshop in the real sense of work. At the heart of the workshop, once keynote presentations had been given and the on-site case studies completed, all participants joined small work groups that reflected deeply and at length on various aspects of the theme. Each group was given a particular issue to explore, a set of questions as a guide, and an expectation that members would come up with new visions and pathways for the development of TVET programmes in Pacific secondary schools.

Groups were advised not to spend too much time reflecting on what had been, or what is, but on what might be. That is, they were asked to explore new ideas and new directions in light of the case studies they had experienced and the presentations they had heard.

During the preceding three years, staff of the PRIDE Project had evolved an effective process for managing regional workshops in ways that empowered participants and led to productive outcomes. The central feature of each workshop, including this one, was a programme that allocated at least half of the available time to group work and reporting. In the case of the Palau workshop, the groups reported via a PowerPoint presentation and a short written summary.

The commitment of participants to generating new ideas and directions was impressive. Groups met well beyond their allocated times, often late into the evening. On the final two days their presentations were delivered with clarity and conviction. A skilled rapporteur kept detailed written notes on each presentation, and the questions and discussion generated by it.

The eight chapters at the core of this book are based on the group presentations. In a very real sense, each one of the workshop participants is an author of this book. They have all made valuable contributions. Essentially, this is a book written by Pacific people for Pacific people. It is therefore highly relevant to the needs of Pacific students and the schools they attend. It should be an excellent resource for policy development and planning in Ministries/Departments of Education.

As usual with PRIDE Project workshops, we invited a senior academic from the University of the South Pacific to assist as a critical friend. On this occasion the then Head of the School of Education, Dr Akhilanand Sharma, kindly agreed to
assist. He made an invaluable contribution, providing an overview at the end of each day, challenging us to focus on key issues and ideas.

Beliefs underlying the workshop

Fundamental to the workshop were two key beliefs. The first was that the planning of TVET in Pacific secondary schools should grow out of the needs and wishes of local communities. For too long, Pacific educators have relied on outsiders, especially aid donors and consultants from western nations, to decide the content and processes of the school curriculum. There was a strong sense at the Palau workshop that Pacific educators are more than capable of listening to the voices of their own people and developing their own curricula and teaching methods.

The second belief was that TVET programmes in Pacific secondary schools should be built on local knowledge, skills and wisdom, as well as the best ideas and practices of the global world. Young people in the Pacific need to be strong in their own cultures and identities, as well as having the skills and capabilities to join a global workforce.

Emerging metaphors

As with most workshops in the Pacific, several significant metaphors emerged during presentations and discussions. These metaphors helped to convey the essence of our ideas. They added clarity and meaning to our deliberations. Here are three of them:

**Head, hands and heart**

The secondary school curriculum should engage the mind as well as develop practical skills. Equally importantly in the Pacific is the nurture of the spirit through a curriculum that is grounded in the values and wisdom of the culture.

**The master key**

Hotel cleaners usually are given a master key that allows them to enter every room. TVET should become the master key that opens up all potential doors to employment, sustainable livelihoods and self-reliance.
Outcomes of the workshop

Each of the work groups came up with key recommendations for the development of TVET policy, planning and programmes in Pacific secondary schools. I will try and summarise here what I believe to be the most important ideas arising from the workshop.

**Status of TVET:** Every Pacific nation should have a policy of vocationalising secondary school programmes for all students. The vocational and the academic should be fully integrated in the curriculum. The vocational should be relevant to the employment needs and opportunities of the nation.

**Industry partnerships:** Ministries/Departments of Education need to nurture close partnerships with employers, thereby opening up opportunities for student work attachments and internships, and for industry partners to engage with students in the classroom.

**Standards:** Every Pacific nation needs a clearly articulated qualifications framework managed by a recognised accreditation council.

**Student assessment:** To ensure effective integration of TVET into the curriculum, a variety of assessment modes should be used to measure student learning outcomes, including formative, summative and diagnostic. There is a particular need to develop competency-based approaches. Reliance on external examinations should be reduced.

**Status of TVET teachers:** There is an urgent need in the Pacific to raise the status of TVET teachers, especially through the upgrading of qualifications, the establishment of salary parity with other teachers, and the development of effective career pathways.
Training of TVET teachers: A more systematic approach to the pre- and in-service preparation of TVET teachers is needed. Regional cooperation is essential. PATVET could play a strategic role here. As part of their training, all TVET teachers should gain first-hand industry experience.

Traditional knowledge and skills: TVET programmes in secondary schools should draw on the local as well as the global, blending the two in ways that strengthen cultural identity. Community-based learning can be used, the students working alongside older people with traditional skills. The focus should be on broader life skills and livelihoods, as well as specific job preparation. Schools and their communities should work collaboratively.

A holistic approach: By promoting self-sufficiency, self-reliance and self-employment, the TVET curriculum can become part of a truly lifelong approach to learning. Within such a curriculum there is no room for drop-outs. All students are included. Rather than trying to draw alienated students into the school, the school should go out to them, offering mixed-mode programmes at community level.

Students with special needs: Individual career pathways need to be developed for students with special learning needs, based on close collaboration with parents and the local community. Pathways need to be realistic and achievable. Ideally the community will play a significant role in guiding and mentoring students, with older, retired people sharing their knowledge and wisdom in culturally supportive ways.

TVET in primary schools: If we take a truly lifelong approach to learning, there is every reason to begin training in life-skills and livelihoods in the primary school. A culturally grounded approach that integrates academic learning with elements of TVET is fully appropriate in the primary curriculum. This will require community support and participation, and an experiential approach to learning.

Lifelong learning: As noted in the earlier discussion about the PRIDE benchmarks, there needs to be much closer articulation between primary and secondary school, and between secondary school, TVET and the world of work. This articulation can be strengthened by taking a lifelong approach that emphasises the development of life-skills and livelihoods.
Conclusion

In my view, the Palau workshop was one of the most important, and most successful, of all the PRIDE Project regional workshops. All participants engaged deeply with the ideas and issues being discussed. Dr Rupert Maclean’s presentations challenged everyone’s thinking and opened up new options for the delivery of school-based TVET in the Pacific. The outcomes of the group work were truly inspirational. The on-site case studies in Palau, and the case studies presented by representatives from Fiji and Papua New Guinea, showed just what can be achieved by committed and capable educators.

This book, which so clearly captures the key themes and ideas of the workshop, deserves to be widely studied within the Pacific. I hope it is equally as inspirational as the workshop itself in leading the way forward to a more integrated approach to secondary schooling and beyond. Students in the Pacific have long been trapped in a secondary school curriculum driven by the demands of an external examination system that has emphasised the academic at the expense of other equally important aspects of learning.

The vision of this book is a new style of Pacific secondary schooling with a holistic curriculum incorporating both the vocational and the academic, and deeply grounded in local values and wisdom. Schools should be preparing their young people with the skills and knowledge to walk confidently in a rapidly changing global world. To achieve this goal, students also need a deep grounding in their own cultures, and a strong sense of their identity.

The pathways to achieving this goal will vary from country to country, but in every case they will be responsive to the needs and wishes of local communities as well as national economic and employment priorities. The curriculum should motivate all young people to continue right through their secondary schooling. There can be no dead-end pathways. Rather, educators must ensure that students have a choice of pathways, and flexibility to move between them.

New visions. New pathways. My hope is that this book will inspire Pacific educators to transform their policies and planning for secondary education to ensure that
the vocational and the academic are fully integrated in a new curriculum for the twenty-first century.

Reference