This article is based on a paper prepared for the Extraordinary Meeting of the Faculty of Education of the University of Papua New Guinea on Non-Formal Education, which was held in Goroka in August 1984. Its focus is the countries which belong to the University of the South Pacific region: Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tuvalu, Tonga, Tokelau and Western Samoa, and it is hoped that it will raise questions of relevance to Papua New Guinea. Despite Papua New Guinea's greater size and population, it has many issues in common with the USP region in relation to non-formal education. The paper will look at some of the problems of definition of non-formal education in relation to the Pacific Islands, the problems of scale and diversity, and of history, which make the priorities of the region somewhat different from Asia (with which we are lumped together as a United Nations region), and unique in relation to most other third world regions. It will be suggested that the professional orientation of non-formal and adult educators has been shaped by needs and priorities which do not reflect those of the Pacific Islands, as have the various aid systems and programmes which support non-formal education projects.

The problem of definition

Adult education as a discrete and serious branch of education was developed in the first world and it was not until the 1950s that its value to the third world was recognised and it was linked to the concept of community development, fundamental education and literacy programmes. In an overview of regional trends in adult education and development by the UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific only Papua New Guinea is referred to among the Pacific Islands. The report notes the multiplicity of terms used for activities which might be subsumed under the most comprehensive term "Continuing Education": adult education, non-formal education, out-of-school education, lifelong education, complementary education, community education, are some of the common terms used. Not only is continuing education subject to diverse terminology, but different things
are understood by these terms, depending on how they are defined in particular countries. An immense variety of programmes in both the public and private sectors are covered by these terms.

The UNESCO report referred to above observes that there are various ways in which countries of the Asia-Pacific region might be grouped in their conception of and approaches to adult education. One of these is the extent to which adult education is a deliberately conceived strategy for national development, another is the prominence given to literacy in national programmes. I will suggest that the Pacific Islands fit into neither of these broadly grouped approaches.

Non-formal education as a national strategy

The Pacific Islands are unique in the modern world for the diversity of their indigenous cultures, the small-scale character of their societies, the geographical isolation presented by mountain ranges and oceans and the historically recent impact of alien cultures and technology upon them. I use the word “alien” because Pacific Islanders were drawn suddenly, during the nineteenth century, into the margins of an accumulated civilisation derived from all corners of the earth by Western Europeans, who rather arrogantly assumed that they could claim credit for the greatest achievements of this civilisation.

While this is not the place to review the colonial history of the South Pacific, a general point might be made. The populations of those islands where foreign settlement was not the primary goal of the colonising powers were subject to policies designed to suit the economic and strategic interests of their rulers. Only very belatedly in the 1950s, in many cases only a decade or so before most of the colonial powers removed themselves from direct control of the Pacific Islands, was a system of formal state education leading to secondary schooling introduced.

Prior to this, such formal education as was available to Pacific Islanders was offered by the churches, in some instances with small government subsidies. Since decolonisation, most governments of the Pacific Islands region have devoted a massive proportion of the resources available to them to build formal western-oriented education systems. The general assumption has been that formal education is fundamental to development. Despite challenges to this proposition and to the way in
which development has been defined, the governments of the independent countries remain committed to this path. Only very tiny states such as Tuvalu are wondering whether, in the absence of opportunities for employment of school leavers, the costs of post-primary education can be afforded.

This is a point which has to be made in relation to the fundamental differences in the status of education between Asia and the Pacific Islands. The relatively small populations and the high proportion of external aid expenditure per capita in the Pacific Islands mean that universal formal education, at least to junior secondary level is an attainable goal. While there is considerable debate as to the ultimate relevance of the goal itself, it explains why the Pacific Islands governments do not make non-formal education a national strategy. It is given lip-service in development plans but not funding or coherent policies for implementation. Furthermore, large, powerful bureaucracies have developed around the formal education systems, which tend to be resistant, and sometimes hostile, to the less elitist approach to education proposed by the philosophers of adult and non-formal education.

Overall, non-formal education in the region is offered by a multitude of non-governmental agencies, including the churches, and government involvement where it exists, is generally confined to a vaguely defined and enacted coordinating role, or to vocational training programmes. Even at the University of the South Pacific which serves the eleven countries referred to in the introduction to this paper, Continuing Education (non-formal, non-credit) programmes are regarded by academic planners as a low priority activity. These programmes depend on funding from outside the University’s regular financial sources, and such funding must be sought through the initiatives of the Centre Directors and the Director of Extension Services.

**Literacy in national programmes**

In many developing countries, particularly in Asia, literacy education is almost synonymous with adult education. As the UNESCO report cited previously notes, countries of the Asia-Pacific region might be grouped according to the extent to which prominence is given to literacy in national adult education programmes. The Pacific Islands may be grouped with Sri Lanka, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea and the Republic of Vietnam as countries within the Asia-
Pacific region which give the least official emphasis to literacy work.

It would be instructive if at this point I could present a comparative statistical overview of literacy rates for Pacific Island states. The fact that I cannot is in itself interesting; literacy statistics are among the least reliable or least available data for the region and this has something to do with the desire of several Pacific island states to be designated by the United Nations as Least Developed Countries, for which one of the requisite criteria is a low national level of literacy.

This coveted status, entailing special aid and loan privileges, is held only by Western Samoa which has, or had, among the highest literacy rates in the South Pacific. Perhaps the fact that in the 1960s almost all Samoan adults were literate in the Samoan language largely through the non-formal, village-centred education programmes of the churches, was the means by which this potentially embarrassing fact was concealed. If "literacy" was defined as the ability to read and write English, attained through the medium of formal education, Samoans deserved their status as a nation comprised largely of "illiterates". I suggest that in those Pacific Island states where there is a single national language (or a standardised dialect) such as Tonga, Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Fiji, Nauru and Western Province in Solomon Islands, the percentage of adult literacy in these languages would be high, at least among the older generation. As in Western Samoa, this would be the result of the non-formal community education provided by the churches to enable people to study the Bible and other religious material.

In Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, as in Papua New Guinea, great linguistic diversity raises familiar problems for literacy education. In which language should literacy be taught? If it were taught in the hundreds of local languages, what would the functional use of such a skill be? Literacy in local languages might help to preserve those languages in the form in which they are spoken, but if there is nothing to read in that language other than perhaps the Bible, and if people have an orally oriented culture, is literacy education an advantage? Similar problems arise in relation to literacy education in creole languages such as Pijin or Bislama. Might they not undermine the indigenous languages if these lingua franca were promoted nationally as a medium of literacy? Might they not interfere with the acquisition of English (or French, in Vanuatu) through formal education?
I refer to these familiar arguments only to emphasise the reasons why literacy education receives the same low priority in the Pacific Islands as it does in the most economically and educationally advanced countries of the Asia-Pacific region. The "Literacy Debate" of recent years has barely touched our region.5

**Cultural preservation**

One concern which is common to the Pacific Islands region (or sub-region in United Nations terms) is cultural preservation. As a number of Pacific Islands scholars have observed, this is a subject about which a great deal has been said and relatively little has been done. Like non-formal education, it is something which governments espouse in principle, which is discussed and endorsed at many regional and international conferences, but in fact receives low priority when it comes to the disbursement of national funds or requests for externally funded projects (unless aid donors designate funds as being available exclusively for that purpose).

Even the term "cultural preservation" raises problems for Pacific Islanders concerned about the steady erosion of the largely non-formally transmitted arts and crafts, knowledge and oral traditions, and cultural values of Pacific peoples under the impact of external influences. As the Papua New Guinea writer John Kasaipwalova said in the 1970s, "One can only preserve that which is dead."

It seems very probable that Pacific Islanders, like people of other regions, wish to encourage the vitality and growth of their cultural traditions rather than simply to preserve them in some static sense. It is here that one of the great dilemmas of the Pacific region is to be found. The diversity of the region makes its cultural traditions particularly vulnerable. The standardising influences of an external culture which emanates primarily from the west and gathers momentum through increasingly accessible mass technology and media is seemingly inexorable in its global influence. The large-scale cultures of Asia which embrace millions seem better equipped to adapt this process to their own cultures than the small-scale cultures of the Pacific Islands.

The television "Knowledge Network" of Canada is an outstanding example of how new technology could be harnessed to bring knowledge to the isolated communities of the South Pacific. Will our leaders have
the foresight and imagination to plan for such facilities as the Pacific Islands enter the TV age?

Non-formal education for social change and development

An influential philosophy of non-formal education, as defined by Paulo Freire, in his concept of “conscientization”, argues that mass education should be a process of demystification of the prevailing social order through enabling people to ask questions and call things into question. Many exponents of alternative approaches to development perceive non-formal education as the key instrument of a more just and democratic programme of development.

Put very simply, critics of the orthodox approach to development of third world countries which argues the priority of economic growth, point out that the concentration of resources on the creation of economic infrastructure and a system of elite education benefits only a privileged minority. The argument that the benefits of such a development strategy will ultimately “trickle down” to the masses has been strongly criticised. Despite apparently miraculous examples of a successful outcome of the orthodox approach to development in countries such as Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, there is so far little evidence to suggest that the positive effects postulated by orthodox development theory apply to nations whose people have, until very recently, been engaged in a primarily subsistence economy in small-scale societies with systems of communal land tenure, and who have been administered under paternalistic colonial regimes. Indeed, it has been argued by many that orthodox development strategies lead to the creation of a class system and increasing exploitation and impoverishment of the mass of the population, with none of the balancing forces of industrial societies, be they socialist or capitalist.

The “development education” approach to non-formal education is perhaps the most attractive to idealists and the least attractive to governments. Fortunately in the Pacific Islands we do not have despotic regimes of the Right or the Left; nor do we have mass hunger and poverty, landlessness and oppression. Or perhaps I should say we do not have them on a significant scale, yet. For while we have been fortunate that since decolonisation, governments in the region have been benevolent compared to many other parts of the third world, there is no cause for complacency.
The preconditions for increasing poverty exist; rapid population growth, continuing dependence on external aid and resources, pressure on land in many areas, and thoughtless exploitation of resources which affect the delicate ecological balance between man and the environment of small islands.

Social justice and good government in the future will depend upon Pacific Islanders increasing their understanding of both their rights and obligations as citizens, and also the choices with which governments are confronted in their dealings with the outside world.

It may be that the greatest challenge for non-formal education in the region will be to increase mass awareness of these issues. Yet it often seems to me that the apostles of small-scale rural development and community education are insufficiently sensitive to the need for programmes in which local people identify and solve problems within the framework of their own cultures.

Non-formal education in the Pacific Islands is conducted largely by or through Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or Private Voluntary Agencies (PVAs) supported by external aid programmes which include funds raised by their own parent organisations overseas, or funds channelled through multi-lateral aid sources, from private foundations or foreign government sources. As I have said, national government involvement, where it exists, tends to be confined to a coordinating role. Even non-formal training institutions such as vocational and rural training centres and multi-craft programmes which are nominally government operated, depend heavily upon such agencies and their resources. UN agencies, becoming more aware of the difficulty for Pacific Islands countries to absorb or benefit from projects designed primarily for Asia, assist both government and non-government agencies and institutions.

Too often, enthusiastic non-formal educators from afar arrive among Pacific Island communities with idealistic preconceived models of what is "appropriate" and "progressive" without careful consideration of the strengths and values already existing in these communities. One of the most cutting observations I have read on this subject was made by V.S. Naipaul, writing of a village development programme in Indonesia, in which he concluded that the exercise was that of privileged experts teaching "villagers how to be villagers."
One of the major areas of church and non-government endeavours has been in rural training centres of various kinds. These centres tend to provide training in agriculture and other skills for rural life to young men. If young women are trained, the emphasis is usually upon sewing, cooking and other domestic skills. Few offer training to couples or families in subjects which reflect the division of labour between men and women in Pacific societies. The experts and volunteers come with their projects, filled with enthusiasm and after a few years leave, often with a sense of failure and disillusionment. It is hard to be critical of this process because it involves so much goodwill and idealism. Yet certain points must be addressed.

This paper would certainly not be the first to mention the problem of the capacity of small Pacific Island countries to absorb all aid programmes offered to them, the duplication of projects, and competition between NGOs, or the way in which failed rural training programmes are replicated — the “reinvention of the wheel syndrome”.

Points of considerable relevance to the Pacific Islands have been made by Bhasin and Malik in their review of people’s action programmes in Asia. Citing A.R. Desai, they note the different agendas of NGOs which may be broadly classified in terms of their ideological orientation as philanthropic, reformist or revolutionary groups. In the South Pacific we would have to add to this list groups affiliated to churches or religious agencies. They observe that perhaps the greatest weakness of NGOs is that too many believe that they know best what is good for the development of the poor and needy. The point made by these writers that indigenous groups are too often “the forgotten NGOs” is also true of the Pacific Islands.

Most, if not all, Pacific Island countries have extended families or clans, established churches with an indigenous clergy, and village and sometimes district or island councils. These traditional or neo-traditional organisations have strong institutional roots in their societies and a capacity to work with the people. There are also traditional systems for informal, non-formal and formal transmission of knowledge and skills. NGOs or voluntary agencies need to be careful that, with the best of intentions, they do not undermine these institutions. For example, in 1984 I visited a small village of fourteen households on an island in the Western Solomons and discovered that three NGOs, one of them a church organisation, had established separate projects in the village. The village was divided into rival factions, each concerned with
its own project. I do not imply that the agencies involved caused the
factions, but they provided a focus for rivalry and dissension in a
community which needed instead a focus for unity and cooperation.
While uncoordinated NGO/Voluntary Agency work in non-formal
education in the Pacific remains a problem, rigid government control
over such activities would not be desirable. Cooperative and positive
programmes of coordination and information and resource sharing
between government and non-government agencies are needed on a
national and regional basis.

The role of universities in the Pacific region

It has been in the sphere of culture and creative arts that the University
of the South Pacific has achieved its most notable successes in
Continuing Education. Through the work of Marjorie Tuainekore
Crocombe and others, workshops for Pacific Island writers and poets,
oral historians, dancers, wood-carvers, potters, painters and designers,
textile artists and exponents of dozens of other arts and crafts of the
region have been encouraged. The achievements of these programmes
have not been so much “cultural preservation” as stimulus for a lively
synthesis of the old and the new, of traditional and innovative forms
which encourage cultural continuity and growth. Another major
achievement of Continuing Education at USP has been the
national history writing projects in which histories have been written or
are being written in each of the eleven countries of the USP region by
indigenous people. These projects have been conducted through the
cooperation of Extension Services and the Institute of Pacific Studies.

On the training side at USP, plans are being made to offer courses in
non-formal education as a specialism in the in-service Bachelor of
Education programme. The approach which the University would like
to promote would be a school-based non-formal education programme
through which teachers become a resource for community education
programmes. But teachers need training in non-formal education
designed to equip them with appropriate skills and knowledge.

The creation of dynamic programmes of this kind has tended to be
undermined by the problem which has been recognised by educational
theorists as common to all countries, particularly poor countries. This
is the attitude of parents, students, teachers and governments that
education should be academic, academic education being the means of
access to prestigious white collar and civil service employment. Kaye\(^{10}\) notes that the only way out of this nexus is to change entry requirements to the public service to include examinations in practical subjects. This would require the revision of examination systems and a corresponding revision of school curricula.

The Extension Services facilities of the University of the South Pacific and the University of Papua New Guinea and also the University of Guam have great potential for dynamic programmes in Continuing Education. This could take place at both the formal and non-formal level. Young people and adults who are out of school can be given the opportunity to obtain formal qualifications through distance education or to attain skills for employment, self-development or community service. Extension centres in small island countries or in provinces, in the case of Papua New Guinea, can also assist in a process of coordinating, networking and information sharing with non-formal workers and educators at a national and regional level. Through the wider regional outreach and resources of the Asia-South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education and through international friendships with organisations such as the German Adult Education Association, much can be achieved.

Notes

5. See *Adult Education and Development* 24, March 1985, for recent discussion of the debate.
10. Professor Tom Kaye, Department of Education, the University of the South Pacific (personal communication).