**Submission to the Australian Government: DFAT**

**From Pacific Adventist University, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea**

**1. Solid support for Australia's initiative to dialogue with Pacific Nations**

Pacific Adventist University (PAU) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussion of how Australia can be a "better" neighbour among the Pacific Island nations. This invitation was extended to our staff and faculty - the thought leaders and academic heads of Schools and Departments and received an immediate and enthusiastic response. PAU welcomes, with enthusiasm, the Australian Government's emphasis on transparent and effective development assistance. Faculty and staff have made the following suggestions – many of these suggestions came with multiple endorsements.

**2. Opportunity for Australian universities to mentor PNG thought leaders**

PNG has announced its intention to accelerate the number of PhD's graduating each year rapidly. Offers of scholarships for further study in overseas countries are increasing, but not from Australia. For example, currently, on staff, only three received their PhDs from Australia – Japan, USA, Philippines, Scotland, Fiji, and New Zealand sponsored the rest.

**Recommended: The Australian Government provide more PhD scholarships in Australian Universities to promising teaching and research faculty from the Nations of the Pacific**

**Benefits:** A Pacific Islander with an Australian doctorate will influence hundreds of developing thought leaders among the tertiary student population for many years into the future – this is a long-term investment with a multiplication effect.

**3. Address the present difficulties with current visa (and transit visa) approval for PNG citizens.**

With the growing middle class in PNG, many academics and business people need a few days in Australia for conferences or business appointments to expand the country's capacity in multiple areas. Within the last six weeks, lengthy delays in processing Australian transit visas prevented five senior PAU faculty from attending important overseas conferences in Mexico, Amsterdam and Turkey. In 2 cases, the faculty were refused entry into Turkey on arrival because of confusion with the Australian transit process. Delays in processing an Australian transit visa for the other 3 meant they missed their global training event, creating frustration and ill feelings towards our nearest neighbour, Australia.

**Recommended:**

1. Make the process of obtaining an Australian visa for PNG citizens friendlier. Most nearby countries, including Singapore, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Samoa, and New Zealand, grant visas on arrival; why can't Australia do the same? Further, Australian transit visas for through-travelling passengers need to be streamlined and not remain a barrier to travel.
2. Can the bio-metrics requirement be digitised so that it only needs to be done once?
3. Some countries require PNG citizens to go to their consulate office in Australia to get a visa. Local budgets cannot cope with this vast added expense. Is it possible for the Australian embassy in Port Moresby to somehow arrange this? That would open up the world for our academics who need to attend research and technical conferences in European (and other) countries that do not have consulates in PNG.
4. Provide working holiday programs and allow for recruiting of more seasonal workers for unemployed young people and university students wanting to earn their tuition fees.

**Benefits:** Build goodwill between the Pacific nations and Australia instead of annoyance and frustration. A sense that the Australian people welcome their Pacific neighbours and treat them kindly is foundational to good relationship building.

**4. Avoid direct agreement** between any Australian Government office that may financially benefit a PNG MP, as that immediately creates a strong reaction against the aid measure.

For example, the financial incentive offered to the PNG Government to encourage high Covid vaccination rates in PNG had the opposite effect and proved counter-productive. Rural villagers knew that these economic benefits would not reach the village level, so the cash incentive to the country became a significant impediment in convincing the local population to vaccinate. They decided not to get vaccinated to prevent their urban-dwelling politicians from enriching themselves with public health funds.

**Recommended:** Ensurethat the new policy involves non-Official Development Assistance participation in the delivery of public services. Funnelling all assistance through existing channels of ODA only perpetuates corruption among politicians and scepticism among the populace towards Australia's intentions.

**Benefits:** Including non-ODA partners in the rollout of public services would significantly improve the chances of benefits reaching the villages and greatly enhance Australia's reputation as a good and safe regional neighbour.

**5. High visibility Australian partnership seen with local rural communities on a wide-scale**

Each village/rural community has a church building that brings the whole community together. A long-time NGO development worker in the Pacific has recommended: Why not provide a 5000-litre water tank to every village church? It could be appropriately decorated with a kangaroo, reminding every village person, every day of the year, that Australia cares – providing fresh drinking water at the community's central meeting place. Most of the population does not recognise any evidence of an Australian partnership. So this simple measure would go a long way to counteract that and to mitigate the fallout in No. 4.

**Recommended**: Place a water tank at village churches throughout the country, providing a permanent visible Australian presence in each village. Get the churches involved in this project as they have more reliable contact with remote areas than the Government.

**Benefits**:

1. Well-placed water tanks would benefit rural areas, and the CPP network could facilitate the initiative.
2. Performance and delivery systems would be tested and improved with experience, promoting transparency, accountability, effectiveness, and learning.
3. People across the country would see and experience the efficacy of Australian Aid, giving Australia a far greater national profile with a less perceived need to look "Eastward" for material benefits.

**6. Strengthen rural border areas with Indonesia in Daru, Western Province.**

Western Province shares international borders with Australia and Indonesia. With poverty a big problem, there is a considerable need for infrastructures like roads and services. As PAU lecturers have conducted financial literacy training there, the lack of routes suitable for vehicles is a major stand-out. Maybe Australia could engage trustworthy contractors to build roads in rural border areas to enhance economic activity.

**7. STEM Study Exchange Opportunities for promising senior high school students in their last two years of High school to study in selected STEM priority schools in Australia.**

In the last two years, PNG has embarked on an ambitious program of designating six national high schools, National Schools of Excellence, and implemented STEM curricula initiatives. The National Schools of Excellence Policy, which embeds the STEM curriculum, aims to make Papua New Guineans become innovators and creators of technology, not mere users of technology.

One of our MPhil students currently researching STEM education in PNG has suggested the following recommendations.

**Recommended**:

1. Develop an exchange study program in Australia for selected high school students in PNG STEM-priority high schools.
2. Sponsor a similar exchange program for high school teachers.
3. Facilitate study tours for high school teachers, especially those teaching STEM
4. Upgrade Teacher training colleges and curricula to teach STEM pedagogy and STEM curriculum
5. Encourage and fund more research degrees in Education, Science and Technology.

**Benefits**:

1. These recommendations will provide positive lifelong connections with Australia for exchange students, their families, their peers, and their PNG school.
2. PNG's best academics, university personnel and leaders seem to have spent at least two years in an Australian High School, resulting in superior skills in every aspect of further study, public speaking, and high proficiency in English usage. Currently, this opportunity is only available for PNG students with wealthy parents.

**8. Australian Partnerships in Research.**

Another way to enhance positive working relationships with Australia would be to facilitate the partnering of research. Issues of global warming, pollution, and rising sea levels provide a fruitful field of academic and research cooperation with limitless possibilities.

Papua New Guinea hosts approximately 10% of the world's biodiversity. Researching these vast untapped resources is the focus of PAU's School of Science and Technology (SOST) for undergraduate and postgraduate students. Hundreds, if not thousands, of active chemical compounds are available for research in this area. The recent investment of two machines, not currently available in this country, will mean that students can be involved in natural products research since they come from places where traditional herbal medicines are still widely used. This traditional herbal knowledge passes on from generation to generation, so the challenge presents itself to translate this wealth of conventional wisdom into modern scientific techniques of identification and usage.

**Benefits:**

1. This initiative would positively impact environmental conservation, economics and health.
2. Building human capacity in this area will not only benefit the university but showcase to the world the importance of organic chemistry/ natural product chemistry in the communities of PNG and beyond. This hugely untapped resource needs investment in supporting infrastructure to house these initiatives.

**9. Investing in qualified academics and researchers to lead the next generation of innovators.**

Building stronger partnerships in our region founded on mutual trust, respect, and shared values of fairness and equality are something we all want. Can this desire lead to strategic cooperation between research initiatives in PNG and Australia that provide mentoring opportunities for masters-level students and doctoral studies in Australian Universities?

To make the most of Australia's strengths, initiate research initiatives focusing on climate change challenges, COVID-19 recovery, and measures that alleviate environmental stress. The acute shortage of researchers with doctorates hampers the development of a new generation of researchers, so a scheme to provide more PhD scholarships in Australian universities would be a significant leap forward.

**10. Enhance Technology Infrastructure that makes capacity building possible**

***Alternate power sources****:* Global efforts may be driving new ways to achieve carbon neutrality, address environmental degradation and waste, and adapt to climate change, but PNG needs help with these things. Electricity across the nation is constantly failing, activating standby generators a few times each week (often for a few days at a time). Can PAU become a showcase of the use of alternate power sources? Solar panels on our roofs? Wind turbines on the surrounding hills? Battery backup?

***Cheaper affordable internet connectivity***: The pandemic has driven unprecedented digital transformation and changed how we connect, work, and provide tertiary education. However, inadequate infrastructure and crippling costs hamper PNG's progress. While the more significant burden in current funding for internet service falls on the grass-roots people, the universities also face overpriced and unreliable internet service. If the undersea cable is broken (as it was by a recent earthquake), productive work slows to a crawl. Is it possible to get a second cable from Australia (across the Torres Strait?) to provide redundancy, cheaper bandwidth, and greater productivity?

***Purchase equipment and research infrastructure facilities***to enable sustainable commercial production of new items from natural products in PNG.

Every year, undergraduate science research projects produce new products from natural materials – like manufacturing paper from grass clippings and banana fibre, producing stain removers, pesticides and insecticides from various plants, and so much more. Supporting these innovations would lead this country into greater self-reliance and financial sustainability.

**Support initiatives that address the needs of disadvantaged** and marginalised groups. One example is a project currently run by PAU in conjunction with ANU. It produces dramatic results, empowers the disempowered, fosters economic independence, and reduces violence against women in the villages where the scheme operates.

**11. Incentivising Development**

Focusing on building an influential, accountable nation that can sustain its development would reinforce the foundations of a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. The purpose of PAU is to strengthen its citizens' resilience by training a new generation of business, education, science, health and community leaders. As PAU cannot do this alone, it is very grateful that the Australian Government assures the Pacific, "We will listen to our partners in the Pacific and Southeast Asia and seek their ideas on how we can face shared challenges together".

**Recommended**:

1. PAU's most substantial contribution to *PNG society* is the integrity of its graduates in teacher training, nurse education, societal leadership, innovative scientific research, and business training. In light of the declining values of the global Human Development Index over the last two years, this is a wake-up call to be intentional and strategic in how we meet unprecedented growth challenges. Australia's assistance in PAU's infrastructure needs would make a huge impact.
2. One of our long-term educationists has presented a comprehensive proposal for **Rewarding Individuals with Creative and Innovative Ideas in Education. This proposal would involve Australia rewarding and supporting teachers who creatively implement ideas that solve problems in rural settings. The program outlines:**

* Nine possible areas in education
* For repeatable innovation – original, practical, youth-driven, sustainable.
* Implement the program over five years, from introduction to the final presentation of ideas, and give awards in a country-wide conference.

1. The continuing neglect, deterioration and inadequacy of health services and infrastructure (in PNG and the region) are mirrored in primary and secondary schools. Can an incentive system inspire the head teachers in rural schools and the head nurses in bush clinics to move beyond the prevailing attitude of despair and helplessness in the face of neglected and run-down schools and clinics? Providing undiluted paint for these remote buildings in depressed communities would be a great way for "neighbours" to give a massive face-lift and boost morale.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our hopes, observations, challenges and dreams for PNG with renewed relationship ties with our most significant neighbour.