

SHOULD DONORS SUPPORT THE SOLOMON ISLANDS NATIONAL UNIVERSITY?



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In December 2012, the Solomon Islands Government passed legislation establishing the Solomon Islands National University (SINU). The Act established a new institution incorporating the country's existing vocational and training college, the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE), and set out its functions and governance arrangements. Section 4(1) of the Act established SINU as an independent and self-governing institution responsible for promoting:

scholarship, research, free inquiry, academic excellence, and trade competence and in this process create, disseminate, maintain, and advance knowledge and productivity by teaching, training and other means, for the welfare and needs of the communities that choose to utilize the services of the University.

Welcomed by some as a symbol of national pride and unity, SINU's establishment follows similar moves in Fiji and Samoa. But SINU's establishment has met with scepticism within the Solomon Islands education sector and donor community, reflecting a range of legitimate concerns: the already crowded nature of the tertiary sector, with the more established University of the South Pacific (USP) expanding its presence; the opportunity cost of spreading limited education resources too thinly away from basic and secondary education; a diversion of national effort away from vocational training; and the challenges of building quality tertiary courses in Solomon Islands are insurmountable. Many argue that Solomon Islands would have been better off strengthening SICHE and USP.

While scepticism is warranted, the question this *In Brief* addresses is: now that SINU has been established, should donors support it and how? It should be noted that donors are already providing modest support for vocational training within SINU (continuing earlier support for SICHE). Ironically, while SINU's proponents have justified establishing a university to improve skills development, this is arguably the least compelling reason for establishing a university (being better pursued through a dedicated vocational training body like SICHE). There are, however, broader considerations that may warrant bespoke donor support for parts of SINU, building on the unique opportunities that a national university offers

donors to engage with pressing development problems of relevance beyond education and training.

A key development challenge in Solomon Islands is the lack of national identity and sense of nationhood. The 'tensions' undermined organic processes of 'nation-making' (Jourdan 1995) and today's elite show little enthusiasm to actively strengthen national identity. Donors recognise the lack of an inclusive national identity as a significant development challenge, but struggle to identify tangible ways to sensitively support indigenous nation-building processes. Universities provide donors with entry points to support nation-building by providing institutional spaces for public debates on sensitive national issues, including reconciliation, inclusive development, political participation and accountability. The *national* nature of SINU — as opposed to a regional USP — arguably gives it social license to actively support local nation-building. It is notable that the government explicitly identified SINU's establishment as an expression of national pride, unity and identity. Donors should seize the opportunity provided by SINU's establishment to support its evolution as a credible national institution over the long term. Donors could assist by providing support for institutional capacity-building, including university administration and governance, and the development of core curriculum. This could be realised by funding twinning partnerships with regional academic and training institutions. SINU has already agreed MOUs with a number of local institutions including the University of Queensland, USP and Fiji National University, but these will require resourcing to have a development impact.

The absence of a coherent political elite focused on national development is an important impediment to transformational development in Solomon Islands (Barbara 2014). Higher education can play an important role in processes of elite formation and developmental leadership (Brannelly et al. 2011), although this depends on the quality of the institution, its curriculum and institutional culture. Developmental leadership is cultivated by a range of factors and studying at a national university of itself is not necessary for national leadership. Moreover, the experience of other national universities, such as in Papua New Guinea, highlights the difficulties in nurturing a developmen-

tal elite. But, as a national university, SINU may contribute to leadership formation processes by providing an institutional venue where developing leaders can hone their skills and articulate national visions.

Universities can foster good citizenship, inclusive civic virtues and participatory norms contributing more broadly to good governance (Ndaruhutse 2014). As socially embedded institutions, universities nurture links across communities (business, government, civil society), strengthening social capital. A university's ability to fulfill this role depends on its institutional culture, including its internal governance and curriculum. In a country where the absence of a strong civic culture is reflected in constrained notions of the role of government and public service, SINU could help build a new generation of civic-minded leaders. Its commitment to accessibility 'regardless of physical, political, gender, ethnic, religious or other differences' (SINU 2015) is particularly welcome in a society still recovering from the ethnic tensions. Donor support for university governance and curriculum development may help SINU develop its potential as a key participatory institution.

Solomon Islands lacks national institutions capable of fostering critical public policy debates about the many significant policy challenges facing the country, including reconciliation, gender, youth employment and inclusive economic development. This reflects, *inter alia*, limited critical research skills, resourcing for research, and neutral venues for public debate. Donors are currently the main source of critical policy analysis in Solomon Islands and there are very few spaces for locals to lead technical policy debates (although social media is becoming increasingly important). Universities can provide this space, and build critical research capacity. Local researchers are able to distil, translate and adapt international theories and concepts in ways that are more socially relevant. Universities also provide a platform for debate and research dissemination. Past efforts to build a critical national research capacity have floundered in part for inadequate resourcing and lack of an institutional home. USP has arguably lacked local legitimacy to drive this process. Support for small-grant funding for locally conceived and led research projects, and resourcing for academic secondments from regional institutions to mentor these projects could help SINU build a basic public policy centre.

Realising SINU's potential as a credible national institution capable of supporting processes of nation-building, leadership development and critical public policy making will require targeted donor technical and financial assistance for institution-building (university administration, governance and course development) and staff development (academic secondments, technical support). Modest grant funding for locally led policy research and funding twinning relationships with key regional universities would be a sensible way of bridging critical capacity deficits.

Support for SINU should not be focused on building a national university as a substitute for regional universities. This is a long-term proposition and regional tertiary education should remain central to Solomon Islands' tertiary education strategy. Rather, SINU should be supported to realise its potential as an important complementary tertiary institution with a bridging role for students transiting to regional institutions, and providing an institutional home for returning students to engage with pressing national issues and nurture their leadership potential.

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