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**Navigating National Priorities, Regionalism and Internationalisation
in National Universities of Moana Oceania**

A thesis

submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

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Abstract

This thesis explores how national universities in Moana Oceania navigate national priorities, regionalism, and internationalisation. Focussing on five institutions - the National University of Samoa, Tonga National University, Solomon Islands National University, National University of Vanuatu and Fiji National University - the study is guided by the primary question: *How are national priorities centred in national universities of Moana Oceania?* Two secondary questions explore the impacts of regionalism and internationalisation on achieving these priorities. The research is framed through social constructionism alongside the Moana Oceania concepts of *motutapu* and *wansolwara*, which centre on relationality, the sacredness of place, and shared oceanic connectivity as foundations for knowledge-making and exchange. Methodologically, the study employs critical (Indigenous) ethnography and multiple descriptive case studies, drawing on *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian* as culturally grounded, responsive, and relational knowledge-sharing, supported by collaborative sensemaking and critical policy analysis.

The findings revealed three interrelated insights. First, national universities consistently positioned themselves as sites of nation-building and moral leadership, where higher education is inseparable from cultural identity, linguistic and epistemic continuity, and service to communities and the nation. Second, regionalism is experienced as both an anchor and a source of tension. Regional frameworks and institutions can provide solidarity, standards and voice, but often appear distant from the specificity of national contexts and priorities when driven by external agendas. Third, internationalisation is characterised by uneven power relations, donor dependency and epistemic asymmetry, but has the potential to be re-imagined as knowledge diplomacy when partnerships are relational rather than transactional, grounded in Indigenous leadership, reciprocity and equitable agency. Across the five case studies, centring Indigenous worldviews enabled a shift from peripheral adaptation to epistemic sovereignty and leadership in redefining what relevant higher education looks like in and for Moana Oceania. Conceptually, the thesis explores the idea of a ‘relational university’, elaborating on how national universities are being re-envisioned as institutions whose purposes, partnerships, and governance are anchored in Indigenous ethics of relationality, responsibility, and collective wellbeing, with practical and policy implications for regional cooperation and more equitable international engagement.

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Abbreviations

ACU	Association of Commonwealth Universities
ADB	Asia Development Bank
AFD	Agence Française de Développement
APTC	Australia Pacific Training Coalition
AUF	Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie
CMI	College of the Marshall Islands
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
CPA	Critical Policy Analysis
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EFA	Education for All
EQAP	Educational Quality and Assessment Programme
ESA	Education Sector Analysis
ESP	Education Sector Plan
FSM	Federated States of Micronesia
FNU	Fiji National University
FQA	Fiji Qualifications Authority
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEM	Global Education Monitoring
GoF	Government of Fiji
GoS	Government of Samoa
GoT	Government of Tonga
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
HDI	Human Development Index (UNDP)
HEC	Higher Education Commission (Fiji)
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IIEP	Institute of International Education Planning (UNESCO)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JFPR	Japan Fund for Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific

JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
LDC	Least Developed Country
LMIC	Lower Middle-Income Country
MEC	Ministry of Education & Culture (Samoa)
MEHRD	Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development (Solomon Islands)
MERL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting & Learning
MESC	Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (Samoa)
MET	Ministry of Education and Training (Tonga)
MFAT	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Aotearoa New Zealand)
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoET	Ministry of Education and Training (Vanuatu)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSG	Melanesia Spearhead Group
NUS	National University of Samoa
NUV	National University of Vanuatu
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
OCIES	Oceania Comparative and International Education Society
OECD	Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development
PacREF	Pacific Regional Education Framework
PEDF	Pacific Education Development Framework
PIC	Pacific Island Countries
PIF	Pacific Islands' Forum
PILNA	Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PIURN	Pacific Islands University Research Network
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PQF	Pacific Qualifications' Framework
PSC	Public Service Commission
PSET	Post-Secondary Education and Training
RoV	Republic of Vanuatu
RSE	Recognised Seasonal Employer
RTC	Rural Training Centre
SBS	Samoa Bureau of Statistics

SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SIG	Solomon Islands Government
SINU	Solomon Islands National University
SIQF	Solomon Islands Qualifications Framework
SITESA	Solomon Islands Tertiary Education and Skills Authority
SPC	Secretariat of the Pacific Community
SQA	Samoa Qualifications Authority
TNE	Transnational Education
TNQAB	Tonga National Qualifications & Accreditation Board
TNU	Tonga National University
TQF	Tonga Qualifications Framework
TSLs	Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (Fiji)
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UMIC	Upper Middle-Income Country
UN	United Nations
UNC	University of New Caledonia
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation
UNESCO-OPS	UNESCO Office for the Pacific States
UNICEF	United Nations agency for children
UPNG	University of Papua New Guinea
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USP	University of the South Pacific
UWI	University of the West Indies
VEMIS	Vanuatu Education Management Information System
VQA	Vanuatu Qualifications Authority
VQF	Vanuatu Qualifications' Framework
WB	World Bank

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Chapter 1. Research Contexts (Introduction)

Moana Oceania is home to many diverse nations, peoples, cultures, and languages. It is a region that continues to navigate and confront its colonial¹ legacies. The region has been described and defined in a variety of ways, shaped by contested views of culture, geography and colonisation. External, colonial powers have imposed many of the names used today and are actively critiqued by scholars of the region (Chitham et al., 2019; Hau’ofa, 1993; Johansson-Fua & Crossley, 2022; Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017). Over time, other names have been used by scholars from within *Te Moana-nui-ā-Kiwa* (The great Pacific Ocean). Of prominence are the namings by the late ‘Eveli Hau’ofa (1993) and Albert Wendt (1999), referring to the region as Oceania or Moana. They intended to highlight the region’s significant and unique characteristics in connecting peoples and cultures despite their distinct yet shared specificities. Hau’ofa’s (1993) use of ‘Our sea of islands’ rather than ‘islands in the sea’ (a way of naming used by past colonisers) emphasised a place filled with relational connections, evident in local peoples’ stories and aspirations. The choice in this research to use Moana Oceania to describe the region intentionally empowers and privileges the region's Indigenous contexts and reclaims an identity previously imposed (Chitham et al., 2019; Lagi-Maama Academy & Consultancy, 2019).

Higher Education Contexts of Moana Oceania

The peoples of Moana Oceania have always been ocean navigators, traversing vast spaces and exchanging knowledge (Hau’ofa, 2008; Lewis, 1994; Matapo, 2021a). For well over 2000 years, they have developed systems of knowledge transfer to ensure sustainability through various forms, such as the arts, sciences, personal relations, and understandings of the world, passed from generation to generation (Koskinen, 1968).

The global dominance of religious institutions saw missionaries arrive in the region as early as the 1600s (northern Moana Oceania) and 1797 (eastern Moana Oceania) to convert people and engage with the colonial structures that govern their lands (Coxon et al., 2020; Garrett, 1982; Johansson-Fua & Crossley, 2022; Thaman, 1999). These missionaries established so-called ‘formal’ systems of education, which have served as the basis for higher education's subsequent

¹ Colonial states are territories of the imperial base, separated geographically, that are predominantly governed and administered by the imperial government (Conrad, 2022; Johnson, 2011; Tecun & Ata Siu’ulua, 2024). Examples from Moana Oceania include French Polynesia, American Samoa, New Caledonia, Tokelau, Guam, Pitcairn, and more.

development in the region. Many of those theological institutions remain today (e.g. Malua Theological College, Samoa, 1844). Formal primary schools were established across the region, led by teachers who graduated from these religious colleges. In the mid-20th century, as a new global order was being negotiated after World War II, many islands gained independence and achieved statehood. This provided potential for new opportunities within the education sector, both across Moana Oceania and beyond the region. People with privilege and the means sought academic pursuits outside of their home countries, usually in the seat of the previous colonial power, as opportunities there were greater. Some returned to their home countries and provided training to their communities, while others remained abroad (Dumont et al., 2007; Liki, 2001).

In 1965, the Australian government founded the University of Papua New Guinea (UNPG), one of the first secular universities in the region. The driver behind its establishment was from a development aid² mindset for building capacity in the former colony and spreading democratic, neoliberal³ ideals. A few years later (1968), the United Kingdom and various aid agencies formed the University of the South Pacific (USP) under a very similar premise. USP is a member-based regional higher education institution in which 12 nations⁴ contribute to its operational budget, and each nation has at least one campus. This regional approach was viewed as more efficient financially and easier to monitor the quality of the education (Caston, 1993; McCall, 1984; Naidu, 2019). USP is one of only two regionally governed and regionally serving universities in the world, the other being the University of the West Indies⁵. Although this had the potential to expand access to and distribution of resources, it was not immune to critique (Groves, 2020). As can be seen with other such development-oriented models, prominence and access often sit at the institutions' centres. At the same time, the more remote, peripheral confronting obstacles, diminished access and "progressively marginalised" (Crocombe & Meleisea, 1988, p. 369).

Various overseas universities have also established offshore, or branch campuses, under the notion of transnational education (TNE) (Huang, 2007; Koehn, 2012, 2013; Koehn & Obamba, 2014). On the one hand, these branch campuses provided increased access to higher education.

² Development Aid: Mainly in the form of financial loans and grants from governments, multilateral agencies or non-governmental organisations in support of sector-based projects to low or middle-income countries. The Moana Oceania region is among the most heavily dependent on development aid, particularly in the education sector.

³ Neoliberal: the promotion of a competitive, free market system of exchange

⁴ Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

⁵ The University of the West Indies (<https://www.uwi.edu/>). According to their website: "Starting as a university college of London in Jamaica with 33 medical students in 1948, the UWI has evolved into a modern, future-driven, activist, top-ranked academy with over 50,000 students. Our mission to advance learning, create knowledge and foster innovation for the positive transformation of the Caribbean is centred on producing critical thinkers and leaders who serve the needs of the 21st-century society."

However, they occupy spaces that local institutions could have occupied, and generally import academic structures, ideologies, epistemologies⁶, and pedagogies that are foreign to local contexts.

The relationship between external forces and the higher education sector is inextricably linked, often tied directly to priorities outlined in foreign aid packages or aligned with global expectations. While aid funding may appear to offer greater academic opportunities for university stakeholders, there are tensions and limits to academic freedom in pursuing research or designing curricula that are not deemed foreign relations priorities. Johansson-Fua & Crossley (2022) noted that, “modern forms of what is now seen as formal education throughout Oceania were defined by external agencies, competing religious denominations and funded by international donors or colonial administrators” (p.3) (Caston, 1993; Johansson-Fua & Crossley, 2022). The influences imposed by external institutions and governments on institutions across Moana Oceania have created a scenario in which institutional strategy is often dictated by these funding schemes and the structural design of academia (Thaman, 2008). However, the precarity of this lies in the motivations of most foreign governments to “reinforce their foreign policy goals of strengthening spheres of influence” (Crocombe & Meleisea, 1988, p.386).

As expressed by Crocombe & Meleisea (1988), “In the early years of Pacific universities, most emphasis was given to numbers, without much thought as to how the opportunities were to be shared” (p.343). Questions about equity and access arose as demand for higher education increased (Clothey, 2009). Without the ability to meet those demands, countries throughout the region experienced ‘brain drain’, in which many people studied outside the region for higher education qualifications (Beine et al., 2008; Docquier et al., 2007; Dumont et al., 2007; Healey, 2022; Teferra, 2005). In Moana Oceania, such emigration in pursuit of higher education has been greater for women (23.8%) than for men (16.5%) in the year 2000 (Dumont et al., 2007), with estimates as high as 51% in the region for people with a university qualification (Docquier & Marfouk, 2006). This reality is critical for university leaders and policy makers in Moana Oceania as they consider the future directions of higher education development. It is within these legacies that one must contextualise when researching contemporary higher education in Moana Oceania. It is also essential to contextualise knowledge ecologies, as described by Matapo and McFall-McCaffery (2022), “The notion of self within a Pacific perspective takes on a vastly different etymology from that of neoliberal notions. The liberal individual holds

⁶ Epistemology: the definition, construction, development and transfer of knowledge.

their sense of autonomy based upon their capacities to reason and to rationalise personal choice over a collective ethos of agency” (p.129). The neoliberal, capitalist designs of the contemporary, settler-colonial⁷ higher education institutions continuously confront the collective nature of knowledge construction and transfer in Moana Oceania.

When acknowledging the historical contexts of higher education across Moana Oceania, one could present several activities that could be identified as internationalisation⁸. There is a legacy of people travelling overseas to study, initiatives in the field of Education for Development, agreements with overseas institutions and organisations and multi-lingual course delivery, to name a few (Johansson-Fua & Crossley, 2022; Pearson et al., 2022). While there may be many other impactful and meaningful internationalisation initiatives, there has yet to be any substantive research exploring them. There is an opportunity for universities across the island nations of Moana Oceania, particularly the more recently launched or consolidated national universities, that strive to centre cultures and contexts, to (re)consider dominant concepts of higher education internationalisation, to (re)define it within their contexts and develop meaningful strategies and policies that reflect their contexts. Contributions to the scholarship of higher education internationalisation that narrate the region's positionality and values could support a proactive approach to more equity-focused, Indigenised, and decolonised internationalisation engagement by higher education institutions (HEIs) outside the region. Such an approach has the potential to explicitly present the contexts that make it possible for more transformational partnerships, where relationality⁹ becomes a guiding principle from the onset.

“Colonial legacies stitch together the global knowledge economy with concealed threads.

Capitalising on knowledge, suppliers compete.

Bright and alluring packaged material, stitching education, supply, and demand.

Education for learning and unlearning of localised wisdom, globalising the local fabric of being.

Formulating globally standardised pedagogies for teaching and learning, decontextualised to place, space and the threads that bind relationships.

Politicising Pacific inter-subjectivity as failure.” (Matapo, 2021a, p. 69)

⁷ Settler-colonial: nations where the foreign, colonial settlers remained after independence from the colonial state, and colonial systems and legacies remain. Examples include Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, Canada, and more.

⁸ Internationalisation: the process to integrate global dimensions in the institution through designed programmes and projects.

⁹ Relationality: the construction of a purposeful, collective identity, where one's individuality is honoured within the space and made stronger through the connection with others. It is a space that requires ongoing nurturing and protection.

The Rise of National Universities in Moana Oceania

In the 1980s, challenges to a regional approach to higher education, combined with increased nationalism and independence, led to the slow growth of national universities. A visual timeline displaying the development of post-secondary education in each of the five focus countries in this study can be found in their corresponding case study chapters. Amongst the five case studies in this thesis, Samoa was the first to establish a national university in 1984, followed by Fiji in 2010, Solomon Islands in 2013, Vanuatu in 2020, and, most recently, Tonga in 2021 (Chandra, 2011; Crocombe & Meleisea, 1988; Healey, 2022; Johansson-Fua & Crossley, 2022; MET, 2020). It is important to note that many of these institutions consolidated previously existing faculties, schools and training institutes into their current national university structures. The following table outlines the current national universities across Moana Oceania (Table 01):

Table 01. National Universities of Moana Oceania

Country	University Name	Date Established	Web Link
Papua New Guinea	University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG)	1965	Link
Federated States of Micronesia	College of Micronesia - FSM	1970	Link
Samoa	National University of Samoa (NUS)	1984	Link
Republic of the Marshall Islands	College of the Marshall Islands (CMI)	1992	Link
Fiji	Fiji National University (FNU)	2010	Link
Solomon Islands	Solomon Islands National University (SINU)	2013	Link
Vanuatu	National University of Vanuatu (NUV)	2020	Link
Tonga	Tonga National University (TNU)	2021	Link

This thesis focused only on national universities established within sovereign states of Moana Oceania. However, it is vital to acknowledge the complexity of ‘national’ in contexts that

remain colonial, or non-self-governing¹⁰(UN, 2024). Currently, there remain six territories in the region listed by the United Nations as non-self-governing and administered by a colonial power¹¹ (Decloitre, 2025). In colonial states such as New Caledonia and French Polynesia, political authority continues to rest formally with France. For example, the flagship public university in New Caledonia, the University of New Caledonia, is designated as a French public institution under the authority of the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research, rather than as a university of the Kanaky/New Caledonia nation (UNC, n.d.). This raises a distinction between ‘state’ and ‘nation’, where the ‘national’ in such cases refers to the colonial nation-state (France), even as Kanak and other Indigenous nationalist movements repeat calls for self-determination. Situating this research within only the independent nations of the region does not deny the existence of these contested spaces. Instead, it recognises that a ‘national university’ is itself shaped by ongoing struggles over sovereignty, coloniality and Indigenous aspirations across the region.

National universities are defined as public higher education institutions predominantly funded by national governments with varied levels of additional support through partnerships, but are semi-autonomous in their governance (Bengson Beñas, 2024). The creation of national universities in Moana Oceania occurs through an Act of the National Parliament and generally begins with the consolidation of existing higher education institutions into a new central entity (GoF, 2009; GoS, 2006; GoT, 2021; RoV, 2020; SIG, 2012). National universities have a direct mandate to support their respective national development strategies by delivering academic programmes and technical training aligned to national priorities and development needs. For example, national universities align their academic strategies with national labour needs, build on areas of national economic growth, and strengthen capacities in teaching and learning at the higher level (Bengson Beñas, 2024). In Moana Oceania, government oversight of national universities varies from country to country. Generally, it involves a dedicated government agency that provides guidance, support, and policy directives to the national university (e.g., the Samoa Qualifications Authority in Samoa, the Higher Education Commission in Fiji, etc.).

¹⁰ According to the United Nations, a non-self-governing nation is one "whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government" (UN, 2024).

¹¹ Seventeen territories are currently listed as non-self-governing by the UN of which six are in the Pacific: American Samoa, Guam, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Pitcairn Islands and Tokelau (Decloitre, 2025).

Opportunities & Challenges

Higher education in Moana Oceania faces unique opportunities and challenges shaped by colonial legacies, geographies and cultural contexts. A key opportunity lies with the rise of national universities, as individual nations aspire for greater sovereignty over their educational destinies. These institutions are positioned to enact greater agency in tailoring academic programmes to national development strategies, aligning with labour needs and building on economic strengths. However, external forces, often linked to global academic expectations or foreign aid, can influence institutional strategies, potentially limiting academic freedom and contextual relevance (Armstrong et al., 2021; Crocombe & Meleisea, 1988; Johansson-Fua & Crossley, 2022). The countries of Moana Oceania have also experienced significant ‘brain drain’, with many students seeking education abroad (Beine et al., 2008; Dumont et al., 2007; Healey, 2022). Furthermore, the neoliberal and settler-colonial design of higher institutions often clash with the collective nature of knowledge construction and exchange in Moana Oceania (Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022). Moana Oceania’s higher education sector must navigate the complexities of balancing regional cooperation with national aspirations while confronting external influences and preserving Indigenous knowledge systems. By focusing on context-responsive policies and strategies, these island nations can harness the opportunities and mitigate the challenges to build strong, relevant higher education systems (Armstrong et al., 2021). More details on the national and institutional contexts for each case study are included in their respective chapters (Chapters 4-8).

Higher Education Internationalisation

Internationalisation, as a concept, was first developed to explain the processes by which businesses entered markets outside their home countries. As the forces of globalisation¹² and neoliberal capitalism spread, the role of HEIs shifted, altering their competitive positioning internationally (Maringe & Foskett, 2010). Higher education internationalisation began to formalise in the 1990s through the establishment of international offices, the introduction of postgraduate qualifications in international education, and the development of research on higher education internationalisation theory and practice. Research in higher education internationalisation has been primarily driven by practitioner-scholars striving to strengthen

¹² Globalisation: the international interconnectedness and global movements of products, services and peoples, largely in support of growing the dominant market economies.

their collective work and gain recognition for it as a discipline deserving of scholarship (Knight, 2012, 2013). This research has developed standardised best practices, models, frameworks, strategies, and definitions (Arum & Van de Water, 1992; de Wit, 2002; Knight, 1993, 1994, 2003, 2004; Söderqvist, 2002; Van der Wende, 1997). Knight (1994) formalised a definition of higher education internationalisation as “the process of integrating international, intercultural and global dimensions into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (p.7). The most recognised internationalisation activities include study abroad and student exchange, international student recruitment and support services, international partnerships for research or academic collaborations, transnational education and branch campuses, internationalisation of the curriculum and internationalisation at home¹³.

After two decades of tremendous growth in scholarship and professionalisation of the field, de Wit and Hunter (2015) modified Knight’s definition with some added language (additions in italics): “the *intentional* process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, *in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society*” (p.3). Following this definition, a fascinating debate ensued on the use of the word ‘intentional’ in this revised definition (de Wit, 2019; Lee, 2021; Teferra, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). Teferra (2020a) contends that the new definition is “neither descriptive nor normative, but rather unduly prescriptive and curative” (p.169). He argues that there is, in fact, no intentionality, as the global higher education system has been designed to privilege the Global North¹⁴, thereby coercing the Global South¹⁵ into this structure. This is particularly made evident, for example, through the asymmetrical power dynamics of internationalisation partnerships (Gray et al., 2022; Koehn & Obama, 2014).

University internationalisation partnerships are relationships formed, formally or informally, with other universities for general or specific purposes. This is a particularly poorly defined description, as is the spectrum in which partnerships are structured or realised in practice. University internationalisation partnerships could be as simple as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that outlines the intent to partner between two or more entities. Most commonly, university partnerships are developed through individual relationships between an

¹³ Internationalisation at Home (IaH): integrating greater global dimensions at the home campus.

¹⁴ Global North: term used to describe a dynamic of global asymmetry during a specific time in global relations, is not geographically oriented, but assigned to a grouping of nations that are the majority beneficiaries of global capitalism, and both economically and politically dominant.

¹⁵ Global South: refers to those nations and/or peoples that are dominated by global neoliberalism and capitalism. Some researchers have embraced this terminology as an empowering, even unifying, term for the most marginalised by hegemonic forces of the Global North to resist and counter collectively.

academic scholar from one institution and one from another. Partnerships have been utilised in some assessment measures as a metric of so-called internationalisation success. Partnerships could also involve student and/or staff exchanges, research collaborations, curricular collaborations, academic articulation agreements, projects, and many other purposes. These are generally outlined in a legally binding contract that specifies the terms (e.g., a study abroad agreement, an exchange agreement, an articulation agreement, etc.). Internationalisation partnerships are often transactional and perpetuate settler-colonial institutional systems and dominant epistemologies over equity, context-relevant acknowledgement, and the recognition of epistemic and ontological¹⁶ plurality (Bertot, 2020; Chasi, 2022; George Mwangi, 2017; Hagenmeier, 2015; Hanada, 2021; Helms, 2015; Koehn, 2012; Maringe & de Wit, 2016; Teferra, 2012).

George Mwangi and Yao (2021) explain that “research on internationalization often centers the USA as the unit of comparison, thus contributing to academic imperialism. Higher education has become [a] new imperialism (Naidoo, 2011), with US institutions dominating” (p.567). As stated by George Mwangi and Yao (2021), “Internationalization is not just embedded in systems of power; rather, it is a tool used to wield power and therefore cannot be neutral. The process, concept, and construction of internationalization have power in defining which people, organizations, locations, processes, outcomes, and (research) agendas are centered or silenced when HEIs engage globally” (p.555). The influence of neoliberalism on internationalisation perpetuates the inequities that distinguish nations, and these distinctions are then reflected in institutional partnerships, where agency is predominantly positioned with the partner from the Global North (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021; Maringe & de Wit, 2016; Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022). Global data is available but is limited mainly to those countries that ‘participate’ and is based on the priorities identified by the Global North (e.g., Project Atlas¹⁷, OECD¹⁸).

A recent rise in research on higher education internationalisation from the Global South has begun to diversify the analytical lens and to confront this global dominance and influence critically (Maringe, 2022; Teferra, 2020a). Heleta & Chasi (2023) have critiqued the internationalisation models of the Global North and offer perspectives from South Africa, which frame the conversation through decoloniality¹⁹. In their new definition,

¹⁶ Ontology: often referred to as the lens, worldviews or perceptions of reality.

¹⁷ Project atlas: <https://www.iie.org/research-initiatives/project-atlas/explore-global-data/>

¹⁸ OECD: <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/international-student-mobility.html>

¹⁹ Decoloniality: activating practices to delink from colonial legacies

“Internationalisation of higher education is a critical and comparative process of the study of the world and its complexities, past and present inequalities and injustices, and possibilities for a more equitable and just future for all. Through teaching, learning, research and engagement, internationalisation fosters epistemic plurality and integrates critical, anti-racist and anti-hegemonic learning about the world from diverse global perspectives to enhance the quality and relevance of education.” (pp. 269-270). Heleta & Chasi (2023) call on scholars and practitioners to confront the system itself to centre equity and de-centre the prevailing dominance of the Global North in how we both position the research on higher education internationalisation and our academic interventions. The definition proposes a shift in perspective; while born of the South African experience, it offers us an opportunity to nurture greater reflexivity in our scholar-practitioner selves and to engage in more mindful, equitable, and transformative internationalisation research and practice.

In this research thesis, the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders were explored as they navigated expectations and engagements with internationalisation activities at the five national universities in Samoa, Tonga, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji. Amongst other areas of significance, this research has the potential to support and guide internationalisation grounded in equity and responsive to the contexts of the burgeoning national universities in the Moana Oceania.

Layers of Complexities: National Priorities, Regionalism and Internationalisation

This research study confronts the prevailing dominance of the Global North as the reference by which higher education is benchmarked. This is evident in university rankings (THE, 2022), research funding allocations, and curriculum design, which often prioritise systems and structures from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand. The dominance of the settler states of the Global North in academic scholarship has resulted in a move away from a knowledge ecology to a knowledge economy (Johansson-Fua & Crossley, 2022), where academic hierarchies (Altbach, 2004; Teferra, 2019, 2020a, 2020b) are prevalent, demonstrated and have created limits to epistemic and ontological pluralism. For example, the widespread adoption of the Euro-western ‘publish or perish’ model incentivises research that is aligned with Global North priorities and methodologies, marginalising locally relevant research in the Global South (Curry & Lillis, 2004; Di Bitetti & Ferreras, 2017; Kirkpatrick, 2009; Smeyers et al., 2014). A failure to acknowledge pluralism

in epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies²⁰ in the higher education sector further strengthens academic hegemony. This hegemonic approach has created a systematic privileging of Euro-Western²¹ knowledge, governance structures, and research and policy development approaches. The dominant, more resourced academic and research institutions of the Global North have established the rules of engagement, thereby essentially dictating the learning and scholarship in higher education in the Global South for those who strive for inclusion in the global education system (Teferra, 2019). For instance, international accreditation and qualification standards often reflect Euro-Western norms and values, potentially disadvantageous to institutions in the Global South that operate in different cultural and historical contexts. Less resourced economies and scholars of the Global South are prescribed a set of behaviours that dictate what is defined as ‘best practices’ for teaching, learning and research. This can manifest in the pressure to adopt Euro-Western pedagogical approaches, even when they may not be culturally appropriate or effective in local settings. To maximise research authenticity, it is critical to acknowledge and represent the contexts of the spaces, places and peoples, not by comparing them against the dominant paradigm, but by honouring their own value. Ethical, responsible, and responsive researchers strive to create balanced, non-colonising relationships. Often, the language used in education can de-privilege non-Euro-Western approaches by presenting them as “traditional” (rather than contemporary) or “informal” (with formal structures being the more accepted or respected way to structure education). For example, Indigenous systems of knowledge transmission, such as storytelling and apprenticeship, may be dismissed as less valuable than the so-called ‘formal’ classroom instruction. There remains a long path forward to diversify the analytical lens and confront this global dominance and influence. This requires a concerted effort to decolonise academic programme development and delivery, to promote research grounded in local contexts, and to create more equitable partnerships with higher education institutions in the Global South (Maringe & de Wit, 2016).

Regionalism, as defined by Dent (2008), refers to the “structures, processes and arrangements that are working toward greater coherence within a specific international regime in terms of economic, political, security, socio-cultural and other kinds of linkages” (p.5). In Moana Pacific, regionalism has shifted, adapted, and reshaped its construction and purpose. In contemporary times, this has been shaped mainly by external influences (e.g., geopolitics,

²⁰ Axiology: within research spaces, it explores the values that influence research and those involved in it.

²¹ Euro-Western: equating the knowledge derived through Western nations as the preeminent reference for all other nations to be compared.

climate change, natural disasters, colonialism, etc.) (Carter, 2023). Still, there is a growing call to reclaim a regionalism for and by Moana Oceania - one that reflects the priorities, values and aspirations of its peoples (PIFS, 2014). The Lowy Institute (2024) notes, “Regional cooperation is essential for the Pacific, but achieving greater effectiveness requires addressing long-standing challenges” (p.24). Climate advocacy at the global level has begun to demonstrate the power of a united Pacific voice (Carter, 2023). Nevertheless, in other areas, such as health, transport, and economic policy, further investment and collaboration are required. Strengthening regional cooperation in the higher education sector is of paramount importance, as regional and national universities play key roles in knowledge production, leadership development, and capacity building for the region (Jones, 1989). A shift towards “regional webs of engagement” is emerging, emphasising decentralised, multi-sectoral, and multi-governmental partnerships rather than the traditional “hub and spoke” model, in which a single agency directs regional efforts (Lowy Institute, 2024, p. 26). However, this model is confronted with international funding agencies that struggle with such approaches. Once again, universities can serve as centres for the “regional webs”. This evolving approach underscores the importance of Moana Oceania-led regionalism, ensuring that governance structures align with the unique needs, approaches and perspectives of all peoples and contexts of the region (PIFS, 2014). Expanding Moana Oceania regional educational partnerships and fostering a regional research agenda can enhance collective problem-solving and empower scholars of the region to lead discussions on issues that impact their communities (Jones, 1989).

Regional Education Policies

Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF)

The Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) presents a twelve-year (2018-2030) regional education roadmap. It is grounded in a human-rights and lifelong learning approach, aiming to ensure that all learners have equitable access to high-quality, relevant education. Policy priority areas include quality and relevance of programmes, diverse learning pathways, student outcomes and wellbeing, and teacher professionalism. Implementation is structured in a phased approach, beginning with strengthening foundational systems and progressing to national contextualisation, regional collaboration, and evidence-driven reforms. This sequencing is intended to help countries consolidate capacity, monitor progress, and adjust priorities as the regional context evolves. Through these mechanisms, PacREF supports

countries in responding to global and regional pressures, from climate change to shifting labour needs, while remaining aligned with the broader global education agenda (e.g. SDG4). Through strengthened regional collaboration among institutions such as the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific (USP), and various development partners, recent achievements have included, for example, the development of bilingual readers for curricular integration (PIFS, 2018).

SPC-EQAP

The Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP) of the Pacific Community (SPC) serves as the regional agency for strengthening education quality by supporting national education systems and providing services where capacity is limited. Its mandate includes education data and system management, large-scale assessments (e.g., the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA)), curricula and teacher competency development, financial and accreditation frameworks, and research and policy support (SPC, 2021b). By acting as a regional public agency, EQAP aligns specifically with regional priorities, including the PacREF, and plays a central role in monitoring, evaluation and learning processes to track progress and strengthen collective educational outcomes (SPC, 2011).

2050 Blue Pacific Strategy

The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent established a long-term vision for a shared identity and prosperity. Endorsed by the Pacific Islands Leaders in 2022, it articulates seven thematic focus areas:

- Political Leadership and Regionalism
- People-centred Development
(The education sector is situated here)
- Peace and Security
- Resources and Economic Development
- Climate Change and Disasters
- Ocean and Environment
- Technology and Connectivity

The strategy emphasises collective stewardship of the region's ocean and lands, as well as its unique geopolitical position. It sets out a phased implementation plan (2023-2030) to drive transformational change, align national and regional systems, and integrate monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks (PIFS, 2022).

Negotiating Multi-Scalar Priorities in National Universities

National universities in Moana Oceania must navigate a complex landscape, balancing national development priorities with external pressures, demands, and expectations. These institutions have the potential to serve as catalysts for capacity building, research, innovation, entrepreneurial development, cultural and linguistic sustainability, and more. They are expected to align their academic programmes with national economic and social development goals, producing graduates equipped to address local challenges such as climate resilience, health, sustainable resource management, and literacy. However, they are simultaneously confronting imposed standards and benchmarks from donor agencies, education ranking schemes and accreditations, which do not always align with their unique contexts. Additionally, funding constraints, labour mobility and brain drain further complicate this balance. As national universities strive to establish their own identities and navigation paths, they face currents of cultural and contextual relevance, recognition by international academic standards, and demands for alignment with broader regional initiatives. Navigating these intersecting pressures requires adaptive governance, innovative partnerships, resilience, donor agencies recognising localised approaches, and the development of a higher education system that is both grounded in the local context and recognised globally.

Research Aims, Objectives & Questions

This research examined how national universities in Moana Oceania navigate the intersecting pressures and possibilities of national priorities, regionalism and internationalisation. The overall aim of the study is to explore how national priorities are centred, negotiated, and enacted within national universities of Moana Oceania, and how these processes are shaped by regionalism and internationalisation. The study pays particular attention to the ways these universities seek to remain responsive to national contexts while also engaging with wider regional and global higher education dynamics. It is grounded in the view that these universities are not simply educational providers, but significant national institutions that negotiate and confront development, sovereignty, identity, leadership, and knowledge systems. In these contexts, the research explored with participants how universities respond to layered expectations that emerge simultaneously from national development agendas, regional education frameworks, and international actors, discourses, and partnerships.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine how selected national universities in Moana Oceania understand and articulate their national roles, responsibilities and positioning;
2. To explore how regional relationships, frameworks, and agendas influence institutional priorities and decision-making;
3. To investigate how internationalisation is understood, experienced, and negotiated within these universities; and,
4. To analyse how these intersecting dynamics shape the purposes, practices, and positioning of national universities in Moana Oceania.

These objectives are pursued through five country case studies: Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji. These case studies provided a grounded basis for examining how higher education institutions in Moana Oceania navigate multi-scalar and sometimes competing expectations while remaining accountable to their own peoples, places, and priorities.

The thesis is guided by one primary research question, and two secondary research questions:

Primary research question: How are national priorities centred in national universities of Moana Oceania?

Secondary research questions:

1. How impact does regionalism have on achieving national priorities in national universities of Moana Oceania?
2. How impact does internationalisation have on achieving national priorities in national universities of Moana Oceania?

These questions foreground the thesis's central concern with the negotiation of higher education purposes in Moana Oceania. They also provide the organising frame for the literature review, research design, case study analysis, and cross-case synthesis that follows. Rather than treating national priorities, regionalism, and internationalisation as separate domains, the study examines how they are co-constituted in practice and how their interactions illuminate the evolving role of the national university in the region.

Research Positionality and Reflexive Stance

This thesis is shaped by reflexive awareness that research in Moana Oceania is never detached from questions of relationships, histories, power, and responsibilities. I do not position myself as a neutral observer standing outside these contexts, but recognise that my engagement with this study is mediated by my own social, cultural, and institutional positioning, and by an

ongoing and negotiated journey of learning how to listen, interpret, and represent with greater care and humility.

For this reason, the study is guided by a relational and ethically reflexive stance. I approached participants and institutions not as objects for analysis, but as knowledge-holders whose insights require respect, accountability, and careful representation. This orientation informs the way the research has been framed from the outset, while a fuller discussion of positionality, humility, methodological and ethical commitments is developed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2. Research Literature (Literature Review)

The following literature review provides a thematically organised overview of highlights relevant to the research questions and the focus of this thesis inquiry. From the outset, I present global higher education broadly and move towards greater specificity regarding the regional contexts and spaces of this research. Educational frameworks, from global to regional to national, will be positioned to demonstrate the layered complexities of negotiating priorities in the case studies. The literature review then presents previous research on the development of higher education in Moana Oceania, epistemological and ontological pluralism in academia, Indigenous research contexts in Moana Oceania, and, finally, the gaps in the literature that this research seeks to address and summarise the chapter.

Orienting the Literature Review: A Critical and Decolonial Reading

This literature review is not intended simply to describe the development of higher education, policy, and internationalisation in neutral or universal terms. The literature is read through a critical and decolonial lens attentive to power, hierarchy, and the asymmetrical conditions under which educational systems, policies and institutional norms circulate. In relation to this thesis, which means asking not only what higher education in Moana Oceania is said to be, but also whose assumptions shape that narrative, whose interests are served by dominant frameworks, and which knowledge systems, priorities, and institutional purposes are marginalised or made peripheral.

Guided by the research aims, objectives, and questions introduced in Chapter 1 and expanded in Chapter 3, this chapter examines how the existing literature constructs the relationships between national priorities, regionalism, and internationalisation, and how these constructions are often shaped by Global North agendas, neoliberal policy logics, and inherited colonial hierarchies and continued legacies. Attention is given to the key concepts and bodies of scholarship, but more importantly, to tensions, silences, asymmetries, and contradictions within them. This is particularly important in a field where global higher education norms are frequently treated as universal, even though they are historically and institutionally produced within unequal geopolitical conditions.

A critical and decolonial lens is especially necessary in relation to Moana Oceania, where higher education has developed within entangled histories of colonial administrations, missionary education, development interventions, regional cooperation, and Indigenous resistance and renewal. Therefore, this literature review moves from broad global debates towards more specific regional and national contexts; while remaining attentive to how technical or policy-oriented discussions are underpinned by deeper epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions. In doing so, the literature review seeks to clarify both what is already known and what remains insufficiently theorised about how national universities in Moana Oceania negotiate layered and sometimes competing priorities.

Global Higher Education: A Shifting Landscape

The departure from the foundational orientation of higher education institutions (HEIs) is expansive. HEIs were initially developed to serve the public good (Calhoun, 2006; Leibowitz, 2012; Marginson, 2011; Pusser, 2006; Scott, 2006) and as centres of knowledge production and learning with “social, cultural, ideological, political and economic responsibilities to society” (Maringe & Foskett, 2010, p.1). However, the spread of neoliberalism throughout the 20th and 21st centuries has substantially shifted this core purpose (Aporosa, 2012; Williams, 2016). As described by Matapo and McFall-McCaffery (2022), “Neoliberal ideology encroaches upon operations and management with tentacles that reach all parts of curriculum design, pedagogy and research” (p.127). Political and economic drivers now surpass knowledge ‘as a public good’, operating the structural and strategic engines of institutional policies and activities. A reliance on the market and an increased value of the individual have replaced their societal responsibilities (Brennan et al., 2004; Dawson, 2020; de Wit, 2019), calling into question whether knowledge-oriented outcomes are, in fact, secondary to financial outputs. The dominance of the settler state economies of the Global North, and their higher education institutions, have resulted in a move away from producing a knowledge ecology to a knowledge economy (Johansson-Fua & Crossley, 2022) where academic hierarchies (Altbach, 2004; Teferra, 2019, 2020a, 2020b) are prevalent, demonstrated and has created a structure that limits epistemic and ontological pluralism. Less resourced HEIs and scholars of the Global South are cornered into a prescribed set of behaviours that dictate what is defined as measurable successes (e.g., league tables/rankings, publications, English-medium instruction, etc.) within the global academy (Altbach, 2004; Altbach & Hazelkorn, 2017; Badat, 2010; Castiello-Gutiérrez & Whatley, 2023; Curry & Lillis, 2004; Di Bitetti & Ferreras, 2017; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015).

The shift from the development of a local labour force towards a more competitive, neoliberal, capitalist-driven, and, some may even say, hegemonic enterprise has been refocused on increased positional competition. Higher education institutions globally now find it imperative to engage in internationalisation to ensure upward recognition in the league tables (rankings) and build their brand recognition and reputation (Altbach & Hazelkorn, 2017; Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Badat, 2010; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). However, the models of internationalisation that have prevailed are often parallel to those of development aid, privileging knowledge situated in institutions of the Global North over that in the Global South through activities such as capacity building, organisational development, and financial resource delivery. Higher education institutions in the Global North have often been criticised for their corporatisation of the global knowledge system, some even describing their international engagements as a new form of academic colonialism (Altbach, 2004; Badat, 2010; Hayes et al., 2021). These institutions have regularly been positioned to carry out research, programmes, projects and evaluations by multilateral institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations (UN), as well as national development organisations such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Australia Aid (Aporosa, 2012; Crossley, 2019; Koehn, 2013; Naidoo, 2011). Often, the approaches to these development initiatives are deficit-oriented, with solutions being recommended from institutions and ‘experts’ exterior to the contexts, with variable attempts towards local contextualisation. Rarely do they orient themselves to successes developed within local contexts (Aporosa, 2012; Carter, 2023).

Higher education institutions of the Global North continue to set the terms of engagement in academia globally, thereby shaping, and some would say ‘coercing’ (Teferra, 2019), the HEIs of the Global South to seek recognition and inclusion by the international academic community. This dominance systematically privileges knowledge generated by Global North HEIs (and, by default, knowledge disseminated in English), as well as their models of institutional governance, research methodologies and ethics, and frameworks for the development of educational policies and plans. As expressed by Maringe and Foskett (2013) “The influence[s] of external, local, regional and international organizations appears to have intensified over the last decade with the US intellectual model as the dominant force on which dependent nation-states as peripheral members rely.” (cited in George Mwangi & Yao, 2021, p. 567). To place this further into context, Stein (2018) presses that, “The inequities and injustices of the present are not entirely novel, but rather are the legacy and continuation of a higher education system whose foundations have been deeply entangled with the logics, relations, and infrastructures of

racial-colonial capitalism since its beginnings” (p.78). In Moana Oceania, the neoliberal forces of such capitalism are experienced across all sectors, including education. This research inquiry unpacks the regional and global forces on higher education within national universities of the five island nations of Moana Oceania.

Higher Education Planning and Policymaking

Higher education planning and policymaking involve processes aimed at aligning strategic educational goals and objectives with national and societal needs, and through addressing institutional human resource and financial constraints, infrastructural and technological deficits, and governance challenges (Salmi, 2009; UNESCO, 2015a). Central to these processes are policy instruments that address quality assurance, relevance of academic programmes, research development and institutional performance, while also considering dynamic global contexts and geographic realities (Jongbloed, 2008; Marginson, 2016).

Higher education policies have become increasingly influenced by global trends, including the internationalisation of education, policy borrowing, and the adoption of models from dominant education systems in the Global North (Knight, 2013; Phillips & Ochs, 2004). This often results in tensions between global aspirations and local realities, particularly in peripheral regions where capacity constraints are significant. While still very much a work in progress, policymakers are becoming more attuned to the contextualisation of global trends within local frameworks, so that planning is globally informed, but locally grounded (Tikly, 2011).

Contemporary education policies are increasingly addressing issues of inclusivity, equity and access. Global and regional frameworks, such as the UNESCO Education 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education), have pushed governments and institutions to embed such commitments in their strategic education plans (UNESCO, 2017). Additionally, national and institutional policies are now frequently incorporating strategies to overcome barriers related to gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and geographic marginalisation, recognising that equitable access to quality higher education is both a right and a driver of sustainable development (World Bank, 2020).

While global trends in higher education policy and planning have shaped national education systems, their impact varies significantly and depends on regional and local contexts. In Moana Oceania, the interplay between global pressures and local capacities presents distinct policy tensions, challenges and opportunities. Developing effective higher education policies is often constrained by numerous factors, such as geographic isolation, vulnerability to climate change,

and limited human and financial resources, which can hinder progress (Crossley et al., 2011; Sanga & Taufe'ulungaki, 2005). Staff movement within governmental agencies and institutions is also a regular disruption to policy continuity. Senior education officials may respond reactively rather than proactively, leading to short-term solutions rather than sustainable, long-term planning for higher education. Introducing policy changes can also be contentious. For example, language policies governing the languages of instruction can be particularly sensitive. Similarly, approaches such as inclusive education may spark debate. At the institutional level, more immediate concerns may take priority over policy development.

Understanding how global policy frameworks are interpreted, adapted, and implemented in Moana Oceania is critical for appreciating how the distinct landscapes contribute to or hinder a more sustainable development. Education policy and planning are deeply embedded within cultural, political and societal contexts, influencing their formulation and implementation. I-Kiribati academic Teaero (2009) notes that policy is often viewed as a medium for change, both in processes and purpose, toward ultimately realising national visions and development-oriented education priorities. He emphasises that effective policies need to be grounded in "relevant philosophies, theories, beliefs, knowledge and realistic aspirations" while simultaneously designing an adaptable framework that allows for responsiveness to the needs of the "intended beneficiaries" (Teaero, 2009, pp.161-162).

While educational policy development and planning are often framed as rational and technocratic, this does not adequately contextualise the political nuances in Moana Oceania, where, due to the small populations, many individuals working in the public sector know each other or are related. These personal relationships, while providing some benefits in relational societies such as these, can also encourage impartiality in decision-making (Bray, 1991). This overlap inevitably impacts the prioritisation and funding of educational policies and plans, thereby shaping their position and implementation in society.

These dynamics also inform how nations engage with global policy trends, including processes known as policy borrowing and policy transfer, which have become central to education reform in the Global South. Policy makers often look to examples they perceive as successful or authoritative from other contexts for adoption or adaptation into their own context. According to Phillips and Ochs (2003), policy borrowing involves the "conscious adoption in one country of policy observed in another," while policy transfer goes beyond adoption to encompass the broader process of adapting policies across different political, cultural, and institutional settings (p. 452). Policy sources are another term often found in the literature to refer to the origin of

the policy borrowed. In contrast, policy reference refers to specific ideas, strategies, or frameworks borrowed or transferred (Burdett & O'Donnell, 2016).

Steiner-Khamsi (2014) highlights that policy borrowing is not simply a transactional process but is well integrated into local politics and may even be leveraged by policymakers to justify reforms, garner funding or communicate a perception of alignment with international expectations. In Moana Oceania, where the education sector is highly dependent on external donors, policy references for quality assurance, competency-based curricula, and accreditation models are often included in aid-funded project packages. The effectiveness of borrowed policies depends heavily on whether and how they are contextualised and whether they recognise local priorities, values, and capacities (Burdett & O'Donnell, 2016; Forestier & Crossley, 2015; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Regional organisations, such as the Institute of Education (IoE), hosted by the University of the South Pacific (USP), and the Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP), hosted by the Pacific Community (SPC), frequently serve as intermediaries between global education standards and the promotion of regional policy coherence. These organisations support the respective government agencies with navigating complex global systems, often through technical experts, the establishment of regional benchmarks and capacity building (Crossley et al., 2011). EQAP, as an example, has conducted extensive work to establish a regionally aligned standard for national qualifications (the Pacific Qualifications Framework) that reflects global models while adapting to local realities. This is still an active project, so the impact and outcomes are yet to be fully determined.

Donor countries to the nations of Moana Oceania, particularly Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, have a strong presence in policy design and implementation. Within the higher education sub-sector, this can be seen through their extensive scholarship programmes and labour mobility schemes that shape how local institutions and governments design their higher education plans and policies, as well as the rippling impact on other sectors (e.g. labour, health, etc.) (Close, 2026; Sanga & Taufe'ulungaki, 2005). While development support can strengthen educational access and build technological and infrastructure capacities, it may also, intentionally or unintentionally, drive national or institutional policies and plans towards donor countries' priorities, which may not adequately reflect local cultures and values (Coxon & Munce, 2008; Sanga, 2005). For example, the introduction of quality assurance frameworks or performance-based funding models has been met with superficial compliance, highlighting the challenges of translating policies into contexts with different governance structures, resource levels and cultural frameworks (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). Often transferred from the Global

North, such policies frequently do not align or integrate with local knowledge (epistemological) systems or relational (ontological) approaches that are embedded in the cultures of the Moana Oceania.

Despite its prominence, education policy transfer has been debated and critiqued within comparative and international education. As early as 1900, Michael Sadler warned of the dangers of ‘uncritical policy transfer’ (Crossley, 2019), writing “We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant” (Sadler, 1900, p.49). Sadler emphasised the importance to the societal and cultural contexts of education, adding that “what happens outside the school is more important than what happens inside because it shapes and influences what takes place inside” (p.52). These insights remain highly relevant today and are echoed by scholars such as Crossley and Watson (2003), who caution against the imposition of foreign models that fail to contextualise their complexities.

The historical legacies of colonisation and continued dependence on external aid and technical assistance further complicate the contextualisation of policy in Moana Oceania (Willans, 2014). Policy effectiveness requires more than a transfer of frameworks, but demands local ownership grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, ontologies and cultural values (Teaero, 2009; Thaman, 2003). Without this grounding, borrowed policies risk becoming symbolic gestures rather than transformative tools for equitable and sustainable development. Thaman (2003) has argued for the integration of Pacific ways of knowing into educational planning, highlighting that education policy should not simply import global frameworks, but reflect the values, identities, and aspirations of local peoples. Teaero (2009) also advocates policies rooted in contextual realities, developed collaboratively with stakeholders through culturally responsive methodologies. These perspectives challenge the dominant narratives of ‘best practices’ imposed from the exterior and promote the idea of ‘best fit’ instead, an approach that honours local ontologies and supports long-term development (Chandra, 2011).

These dynamics can be illustrated through several country contexts. In Fiji, performance-based funding and quality assurance regimes illustrate how policy transfer can be both supportive and challenging, particularly when implementation proceeds faster than institutional capacity can keep pace. Efforts to integrate local language and cultural values into Samoa’s higher education curricula exemplify policy adaptation that reclaims and centres local relevance. The Solomon Islands has faced numerous challenges in aligning donor-driven education reforms, particularly in rural communities, where limited infrastructure, a shortage of trained teachers, and

ineffective community engagement continue to be obstacles to effective policy implementation (Crossley & Tikly, 2004; Sanga, 2016; Sanga & Reynolds, 2021b; Sanga & Taufe'ulungaki, 2005). These brief examples underscore the importance of critically assessing the origins, motivations and implications of borrowed policies, and the imperative to support contextualised policy development informed by local knowledge, values and voices (Barrett & Crossley, 2015; Dale, 2015; Koya et al., 2018).

A dynamic interplay of local agencies, regional collaborations and global influences also shapes higher education policy and planning development in Moana Oceania. While policy borrowing and donor support can bring valuable resources and innovation, their success depends on the meaningful contextualisation discussed previously and on respect for the epistemologies and ontologies present. Experiences thus far continue to unmask the fact that policy transfer alone cannot strengthen educational systems; it must be locally led, grounded, and adapted to approaches that reflect the cultures and contexts (Johansson-Fua, 2005). Research has consistently shown that unless policies are explicitly designed for, or carefully adapted to, local contexts, they are not likely to be implemented successfully (Crossley & Watson, 2003; Tikly, 2011). This highlights the limitations of uncritical policy transfer, where externally derived models are transplanted with minimal acknowledgement of cultural fit, institutional capacity, or community needs (Crossley, 2019, 2022). In such cases, policies risk becoming symbolic or performative, rather than transformative.

The future of higher education planning and policy development will continue to be a site of tension between local realities and global aspirations. Global education frameworks, while providing substantive, research-supported resources, can both support and constrain higher education policymaking and planning in Moana Oceania. The extent and direction of these frameworks are currently being confronted and negotiated by higher education policymakers and planners through a more critical lens to strengthen applicability and local relevance (Johansson-Fua, 2005; Johansson-Fua et al., 2020; Koya et al., 2018). These debates and frameworks inform the critical policy analysis undertaken in this research, discussed in Chapter 3, and operationalised in the case study chapters. Through the case study analyses, I examine how such global and regional agendas are translated into national tertiary education policies and institutional strategies.

Global Educational Frameworks

Global education policies, strategies, and frameworks exert considerable influence on education systems worldwide (Menashy & Manion, 2016; Sellar & Lingard, 2013). The distinct challenges and contexts prevalent in Moana Oceania require careful, nuanced consideration. Effectively balancing global standards with contextualised local realities is therefore paramount to ensuring that education policies truly benefit the diversity of Moana Oceania (Coxon & Munce, 2008).

Within the global education framework, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #4 is central to encouraging “inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2015). The targets of SDG4 include:

- Free access to primary and secondary education
- Equal access to quality pre-primary education
- Equal access to technical/vocational higher education
- Relevant skills for decent work
- Gender equality and inclusion
- Universal youth literacy
- Education for sustainable development and global citizenship

These targets are designed to address disparities and promote inclusivity in education worldwide, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to learn and develop. These elements highlight the importance of education in preparing individuals for the workforce, promoting gender equality, and fostering a sense of global responsibility. By focusing on these areas, SDG4 aims to equip learners with the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute to sustainable development and become active, informed citizens of the world. The framework also calls for strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good (Boeren, 2019; Boni et al., 2016; Kushnir & Nunes, 2022).

While SDG4 sets ambitious targets for global education, including higher education, some critics suggest that its implementation and focus may not fully address the complexities and nuances of higher education systems worldwide (Heleta & Bagus, 2021; Unterhalter, 2019). The emphasis on equal access to technical/vocational higher education and relevant skills for decent work, although vital, can overshadow the broader goals of higher education, such as fostering critical thinking, promoting research and innovation, and cultivating a sense of global citizenship (Boeren, 2019; Boni et al., 2016). Critics also argue that the focus on workforce skills may lead to a narrow, vocational approach to higher education, potentially neglecting the

humanities, arts, and basic sciences in producing well-rounded individuals who can contribute to society in diverse ways (Unterhalter, 2019).

Moreover, the push for universal access to higher education needs careful consideration for quality and resources (Heleta & Bagus, 2021). Simply increasing enrolment numbers without ensuring adequate funding, qualified academic staff, and appropriate infrastructure may lead to a decline in educational standards and a devaluation of degrees. It is essential to balance inclusivity and quality to ensure that all students receive a meaningful, valuable education. The SDG4 framework also calls for strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good, which may require governments, institutions and organisations to work together to forge a new social contract for education that prioritises collaboration, resource sharing, and mutual support (Unterhalter, 2019).

UNESCO plays a pivotal role in shaping global education frameworks, functioning as a central coordinating body and influential leader. As evidenced by its leadership of the Education 2030 Agenda and coordination of SDG4, which focuses on quality education, UNESCO actively steers the international agenda. This commitment is further solidified by initiatives such as the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, which aims to standardise education credentials across borders (Akkari & Lauwerier, 2015; Elfert, 2013). UNESCO's influence extends beyond agenda-setting. The organisation provides education policy advice to member states, enabling them to develop educational strategies. UNESCO sets international standards, exemplified by its work on Teacher ICT competencies, ensuring educators are equipped with the necessary skills for the so-called modern classroom. These standards often serve as benchmarks for national education systems. UNESCO also serves as a vital source of global monitoring reports, such as the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report for ICT in Education, providing evidence-based insights into the state of education worldwide (Edwards et al., 2017; Ntorukiri et al., 2022). These reports inform policy decisions and enable stakeholders to track progress towards achieving global education goals. The multifaceted role of UNESCO, encompassing agenda-setting, policy advice, standard-setting, and monitoring, underscores its indispensable contribution to advancing quality education globally (Akkari & Lauwerier, 2015; Elfert, 2013).

In 2019, UNESCO established the International Commission on the Futures of Education (ICFE) to explore how learning and knowledge shape the future of humanity and the environment, acknowledging increasing complexity, uncertainty, and fragility (UNESCO, 2021a). This initiative seeks to stimulate a global discussion on rethinking education through

extensive public and expert engagement (Carney & Carty, 2024). The Commission's report advocates a new social contract for education, recognising its potential to accelerate change through quality education for all while harnessing its transformative power for sustainable futures. It emphasises that the presented visions, principles, and proposals are a starting point requiring collective effort for translation and contextualisation, building on existing positive initiatives and serving as an opening for vital conversation, rather than a definitive manual, to reinforce education as a public endeavour and common good. Scholars and critics (Carney & Carty, 2024; Elfert, 2013, 2023) demand that a new social contract for education must be rooted in a recognition of epistemic pluralism, "to decentre Eurocentric thought, decolonizing narratives provide useful pointers for how Western hegemony has worked in and through education" (Tikyl, 2023, p.37). In further critique of the ICFE Report, Tikly (2023) argues that the "narratives were flawed, largely due to their failure to take account of their Western-centric bias" and that "decolonial narratives have a crucial correcting role to play in how we conceive of sustainable educational futures through exposing and decentring this bias and providing a basis for more inclusive visions of the future and that such efforts to decolonize education are a prerequisite for realizing just transitions towards sustainable futures" (p. 40).

UNICEF is another global agency that plays a significant role in global education, primarily focusing on children's access to quality education and emphasising equity and inclusion. Its influence is substantial due to its extensive field presence and advocacy, allowing it to work intensively with stakeholders in-country. This on-the-ground approach enables UNICEF to effectively address educational challenges and implement programmes that benefit children in various contexts (Menashy & Manion, 2016; Schaub et al., 2017).

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) stands as the largest global fund dedicated to transforming education in lower-income countries. It operates as both a partnership and a funding platform, which significantly contributes to its influence in the global education landscape. GPE works through partnerships, formalised via what they call Compact Agreements, and provides support through various grant modalities, including School Transformation Grants (STGs), System Capacity Grants (SCGs), and Multiplier Grants (MGs). These mechanisms allow GPE and its implementing partners to tailor assistance and effectively support educational development in diverse contexts (GPE, 2025a).

The World Bank is another significant actor in global education, primarily as a major financier of education projects in developing countries. It also supports significant research in education

policy, which contributes to its overall global influence. The World Bank shapes education policy through both its lending practices and knowledge-sharing activities. For example, the Human Capital Project emphasises that individuals are ‘human capital’ and that education is primarily for productivity. This perspective drives the World Bank’s aim to have governments invest more in their people, thereby influencing national education strategies. (World Bank, 1995, 2025a).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is widely known for its PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) rankings and comprehensive policy analysis. The OECD’s influence in education is substantial, as PISA results often drive education reform in many countries. Furthermore, OECD reports are frequently cited in policy discussions, making the organisation a key player in shaping educational strategies and initiatives worldwide (Niemann & Martens, 2018; Sellar & Lingard, 2014; Xiaomin & Auld, 2020).

Global education policies and strategies, shaped mainly by organisations like UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the OECD, influence education systems in Moana Oceania (OECD, 2005, 2008). These influences manifest through the adoption of SDG4, which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning. Initiatives like the Global Convention of Qualifications concerning higher education can affect the recognition of qualifications across borders, influencing academic mobility within the region (Beridze, 1996). The World Bank’s financing of education projects and emphasis on education as human capital also impact Moana Oceania, potentially directing national education strategies towards skills development for productivity (Hossain, 2022). Similarly, the OECD’s PISA rankings and policy analyses can indirectly influence education reforms in Moana Oceania, even if the region does not directly participate in PISA (Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Sellar & Lingard, 2013, 2014; Xiaomin & Auld, 2020).

The unique challenges and contexts within Oceania, such as geographical isolation, diverse cultural backgrounds, and varying levels of economic development, require careful consideration. While global policies promote inclusivity, critics argue that a focus on workforce skills may overshadow broader educational goals such as critical thinking and cultural preservation. Balancing global standards with local needs is crucial to ensure that education policies genuinely benefit the diverse populations of Moana Oceania (Armstrong et al., 2021; Griffiths, 2017; Jourdan & Salaün, 2013).

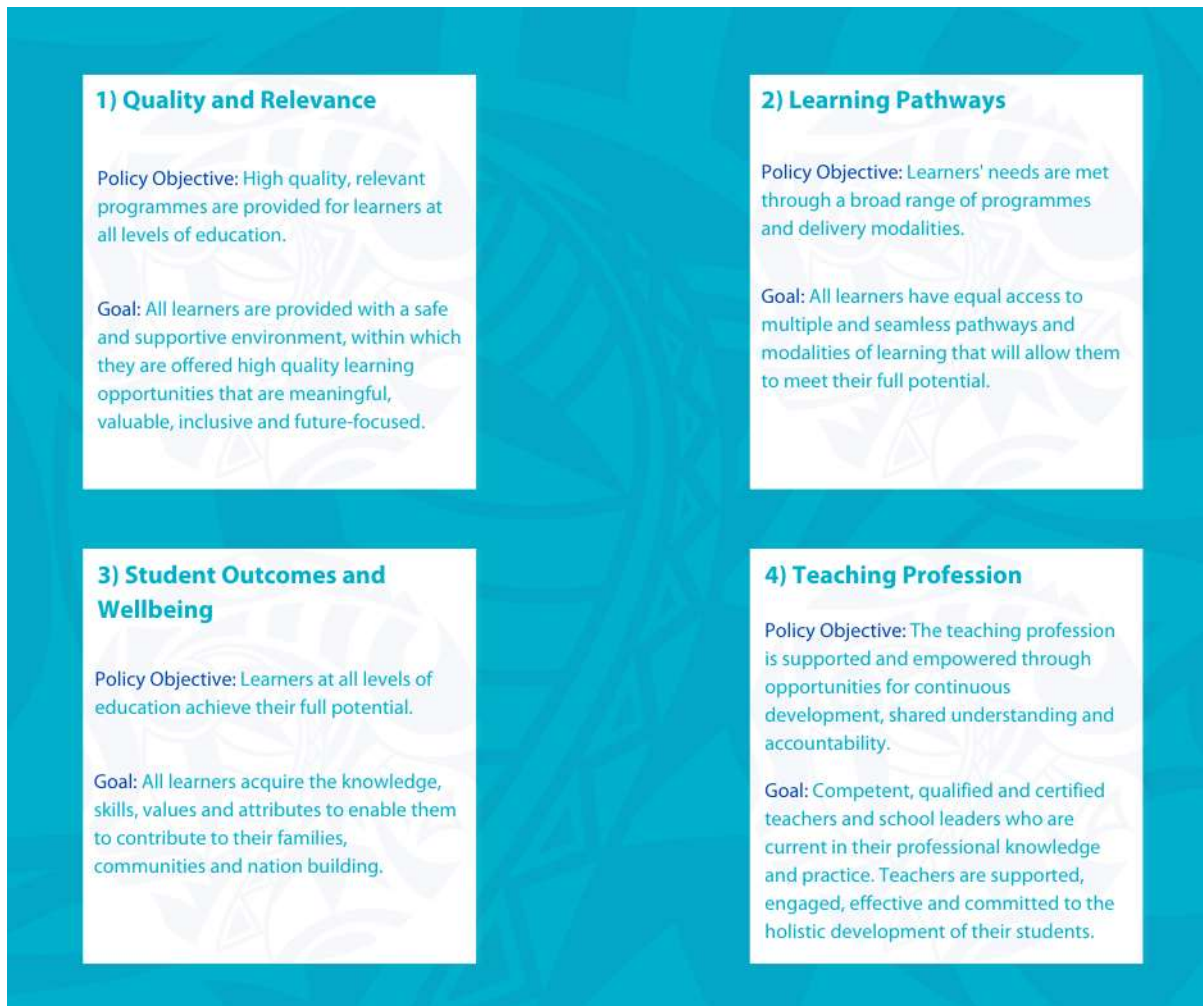
Moana Oceania Regional Education Frameworks

The region has undertaken various initiatives to develop unified, relevant education frameworks that acknowledge and address shared challenges and promote development. These initiatives have been designed to strengthen educational quality, equity and relevance (Lingam & Lingam, 2013; Lingam et al., 2015; Thaman, 2003). Programmes and projects facilitated by organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the Pacific Community (SPC), and the Institute of Education (University of the South Pacific) actively work to integrate culturally responsive methodologies, community-engaged policy development and relational collaborations amongst island nation partners (Coxon & Munce, 2008; Sanga & Taufe'ulungaki, 2005). Although these regional frameworks aim to create unified approaches for collective success, some critics caution that careful attention must be paid to mitigate the potential for reproducing foreign development approaches, limited inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, and inadequate recognition of local governance structures (Sanga, 2011; Thaman, 2003).

The Pacific Education Regional Education Framework (PacREF) is an initiative approved by the PIF Education Ministers in 2018, replacing all previous education plans, including the Pacific Education Development Framework (PEDF) (PIFS, 2018). The PacREF was developed from lessons learned from both the PEDF and the successes to date of the then-called Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 and the Education for All (EFA) programmes (UNESCO, 2015b). The PacREF is a regional pathway that includes four educational policy areas (see Figure 01 below): Quality and Relevance, Learning Pathways, Students Outcomes and Wellbeing, and Teacher Professionalism (PIFS, 2018). The vision is for significant achievements towards the Education 2030 targets included within the SDGs, particularly SG4 (UNESCO, 2016). While PacREF represents an important educational initiative, its focus remains on primary and secondary education and does not currently include higher education. However, PacREF will continue to shape the pathway for students from secondary education to access higher education opportunities throughout the region.

Figure 01.

The Four Educational Policy Areas of PacREF.



Source: PIFS (2018)

Another example of a regional education framework is the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF). The PQF has been conceptualised as a platform to standardise qualifications across national qualifications systems in Moana Oceania, thereby strengthening the recognition and mobility of qualifications within the region and, potentially, beyond. This initiative, coordinated by EQAP-SPC and in collaboration with the Forum Ministers, created a structured framework to map national qualifications across the region and to international standards (SPC, 2011, 2015, 2017). Education planners throughout the region have experienced the influence of PQF as quality metrics become redefined and students and the labour force become more regionally mobile (UNESCO, 2019). Additionally, the PQF has clarified and expanded learning pathways, providing learners with additional opportunities to seek qualifications that are responsive to their unique needs (Bateman & Coles, 2017; SPC, 2015, 2017). The PQF offers a supportive complement to PacREF, thereby providing a regionally defined learning pathway

(primary to tertiary) with implications for national education policy and planning, as well as a stronger voice in global discussions.

Although these regional education initiatives are clear attempts to promote regional cohesion, quality assurance, and progress towards SDG4, tensions remain around centring cultural relevance and epistemological legitimacy. Johansson-Fua (2005) urges education planners and policymakers “to recognise that in any effort to align organisational values with societal values, the very process of value transfer should be reflective of Pacific epistemologies” (p.114). This is further echoed in Sanga's (2005) critique of the colonial impact of education in the region, which indicates that “a technical administrative process, a universal blueprint for development” (p. 36) has nearly always neglected the region's place-based and relational epistemologies and ontologies. To further unpack this important critique, Nabobo-Baba (2009) emphasises that “our thinking processes and our pedagogies, our ways of engaging with our knowledges in the Pacific are reflective of, and influenced by, a wider and more ingrained philosophical basis of our knowledge systems” (p.137). A regional approach to designing educational frameworks is a step towards greater relevance; however, structures and influences continue to shape these approaches, hindering their full realisation.

The Role of Development Partners in Moana Oceania

Development partners have significantly shaped the education sector across Moana Oceania. In 1992, the United Nations identified 57 Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and territories worldwide, categorised into three main groups: the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific (UNDP, 2014; UNESCO, 1994). Since the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, SIDS have been recognised as a distinct group facing unique challenges due to their size, geography and vulnerability to climate change and economic shocks (UN, 1992; UNDP, 2014; UNESCO, 1994).

Many of the countries of Moana Oceania are also part of the Commonwealth, which has engaged with them to address various development priorities. Of the Commonwealth's 56 members, 33 are classified as small states, defined as having populations of 1.5 million people or less. The classification also includes larger countries, such as Papua New Guinea, that share similar structural characteristics and challenges (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2021).

Development partners have also played a role in the inclusion of key international and regional frameworks in Moana Oceania, particularly the SDGs and the PacREF (Sanga &

Taufe'ulungaki, 2005). Their influence extends across financial contributions, technical expertise, capacity building, and strategic policy alignment. Bilateral development partners, such as Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, the U.S.A., the European Union, Japan, and China, have provided direct funding and political influence for education initiatives (Dornan & Pryke, 2017; Johannson-Fua, 2022; Tolley, 2008). Multilateral development partners (e.g. the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank) are influential in setting global education priorities and regional education policies (ADB, 2020; Passmore, 2025). The World Bank's approach to education evolved from its early focus on vocational training to meet labour needs (1962 - 1980) to an emphasis on basic education post-1980, driven by education economists. Adopted widely by other development partners, this shift underlined the global prioritisation of foundational learning. Since 2000, the World Bank has broadened its education agenda to include issues such as equity, social inclusion and social cohesion (Bacchus, 2008; World Bank, 2002, 2011).

UNESCO and UNICEF also play important roles; however, their influence fluctuates. They are often positioned to provide technical expertise (UNESCO & Subrahmanyam, 2020). UNESCO's Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) is particularly respected for its contributions to educational planning, offering high-quality resources and training used widely by Ministries across Moana Oceania. Regional organisations (e.g., the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community) are themselves frequently funded by bilateral donors and serve as important implementing partners for education across the region (SPC, 2017).

A critical dimension of development partners' effectiveness lies in aligning their aid packages with national education and development plans (Dornan & Pryke, 2017; Sanga, 2005; Sanga & Reynolds, 2012b). Each country of Moana Oceania has a central development planning document that articulates national priorities and guides government policy (Bray & Packer, 1993). These are supported by sector-specific strategic plans, which may further break down into annual or corporate plans. Countries vary in their approaches to education policy development, depending mainly on their institutional capacity and available resources (Lingam & Lingam, 2013; Lingam et al., 2015). Development partners who understand and align with these planning hierarchies can more effectively support sustainable education outcomes (Bray & Packer, 1993). Through long-standing relationships and regional cooperation, they help foster more inclusive, equitable, and resilient education systems across Moana Oceania (Dornan & Pryke, 2017).

National and Regional Universities: Roles and Functions

Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in shaping national development trajectories, advancing knowledge economies, cultivating leadership and fostering cultural resilience. Within the global higher education landscape, universities differ in terms of their governance structures, geographic scope, and institutional mandates. National universities primarily function to strengthen nation-building and human resource development within sovereign nations (Bengson Beñas, 2024). In contrast, regional universities operate across multiple countries or territories to address shared developmental, environmental, or socio-cultural challenges. This distinction is particularly poignant in the Global South, where resource constraints coexist with increasing demands for accessible, contextually relevant and transformative education, while simultaneously navigating legacies of colonisation, underfunding and geopolitical marginality (Altbach, 2007; Tikly, 2011).

National universities often serve as a country's flagship institutions, representing the intellectual, professional and scientific core of the nation. In many post-colonial societies, these universities were established as part of a broader nation-building project, seeking to redefine curricula, pedagogy and research in ways that reflect local contexts, languages, histories, and values (Groves, 2019). They are frequently tasked with training public sector employees, health science personnel, and educators (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). National universities can also support national policy development and planning, producing research that informs public health, education, economic growth, and environmental sustainability (Altbach, 2007). HEIs such as the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) exemplify the national university model in the Global South, as they now shape national identity, governance structures, and intellectual independence in the post-colonial nation (Lulat, 2005; Thaman, 2003). Furthermore, they can also be drivers of cultural production and resistance, where Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies are valued and included, and hegemonic Western paradigms are not centred or privileged (Bengson Beñas, 2024; Groves & Tautunu, 2021; Mbembre, 2016; Thaman, 2003).

In contrast, regional universities transcend national borders and are designed as collaborative institutions through intergovernmental or regional agreements. They have typically emerged where individual nations, often with limited resources or populations, may be unable to finance and sustain a comprehensive higher education system independently. As Coxon and Munce (2008) argue, such institutions offer a form of 'regionalism from below', facilitating a platform for shared investment in learning, research, professional training, and public service. Similar to

national universities, regional universities are often less visible in global rankings (THE, 2022) but play a vital role in expanding access to higher education and promoting collective self-determination. They also promote regional identity, cultural solidarity, and collective capacity-building. The University of the West Indies (UWI) and the University of the South Pacific (USP) are two prominent regional universities that exemplify these characteristics.

Established in 1948, UWI is a multi-campus institution serving 17 English-speaking nations and territories in the Caribbean. With campuses in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and Antigua and Barbuda, and an extensive Open Campus network, UWI provides educational opportunities across the region. It not only offers higher education but also generates research and analysis through centres such as the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies (SALISES) and the Institute for Sustainable Development. UWI addresses critical regional concerns, including disaster resilience, climate change, sustainable tourism, and regional economic integration. UWI plays a crucial diplomatic role, providing a stronger, more unified voice in international debates (Jules, 2012).

The University of the South Pacific (USP), established in 1968, serves 12 member countries across Moana Oceania, including the five countries in this research study: Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands. Like UWI, USP uses a decentralised model with multiple campuses and an increasing focus on distance learning, expanding its accessibility across vast oceanic distances. USP specialises in disciplines critical to the development of the Moana Oceania, including climate change adaptation, ocean governance, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Through initiatives such as the Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development (PaCE-SD) and the brand-new (2024) Centre for Sustainable Futures, USP contributes to both its academic and policy responses to contemporary and future regional challenges, sustainability, and epistemic sovereignty (McCall, 1984; Naidu, 2019).

The multiple functions of regional universities include enhancing access to higher education, consolidating finite human and financial resources, and providing contextually relevant curricula that reflect shared regional identities. They facilitate regional intellectual cooperation and produce leaders prepared to address the region's geopolitical, economic, and environmental issues. In both the Caribbean and Moana Oceania, regional universities have also led efforts to strengthen regional identity and self-representation in international debates.

When examined more critically, the literature reveals ongoing tensions in negotiating between institutional autonomy and foreign resource dependency. Salmi (2009) warns that through reliance on foreign aid by both national and regional universities in the Global South, these aid

agencies often impose their agendas, thereby limiting institutional agency and academic sovereignty. This dynamic of resource dependency is magnified in regional HEIs, where self-governance must balance multiple national priorities, legal frameworks, and cultural expectations. Sanga and Reynolds (2021b) note that regional governance can lead to bureaucratic complexity and uneven power dynamics among member states. While these institutions promote a unified regional identity, they can inadvertently reproduce elite patterns of educational access, primarily when access is centralised in capital cities or larger nations. There is also concern that donor-driven programmes limit institutional autonomy and reinforce external dependency (Jones, 1989). Both national and regional universities face systemic challenges that impact their ability to meet developmental goals. The migration of academics to institutions in the Global North has significantly hindered the availability of qualified lecturers at regional and national universities, thereby slowing progress (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021b). Greater investment in technological infrastructure, governance frameworks, and international partnerships has become essential for these universities to realise their developmental mandates.

Nevertheless, these institutions provide long-term resilience and autonomy, particularly for post-colonial and smaller nations. National universities support focused capacity building, innovation, and cultural preservation aligned with national priorities, while regional universities provide a platform for collaborative, mutually beneficial learning and expanded access (Groves, 2020). Both HEI types serve not only as educational institutions but also as transformative agents in their respective nations or regions. Additionally, they provide an Indigenous narrative to counter colonial, imported education models and have the potential to decolonise curricula and pedagogy, as emphasised by Thaman (2003), thereby integrating Indigenous knowledge systems within national universities to challenge the dominance of imported curricula (Groves, 2019; Groves & Tautunu, 2021).

Higher Education in Moana Oceania

Higher education in Moana Oceania reflects a complex interplay of colonial legacies, geopolitical dynamics, diverse cultural contexts, regional cooperation and national aspirations (Crocombe & Meleisea, 1989; Groves, 2020). The landscape of higher education in the region has changed significantly from the early days, when missionaries and other colonial influences imposed their systems and aspirations, primarily targeting local elites to serve in support roles to the colonial administration (Thaman, 2003). With national independence spreading across

the region after World War II, educational systems became more focused on national needs and relevance. However, the inherited educational systems and structures created collisions with these new purposes (Groves, 2019, 2020). The establishment of the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in 1965 by the Australian government, and of the University of the South Pacific (USP) in 1968, catalysed further shifts toward regionally focused education (Teasdale & Teasdale, 1992). By centring shared regional needs in the planning of these institutions, the aim was to cultivate a collective vision and identity and build academically qualified human resources, thereby reducing dependence on expatriates (Johansson-Fua & Crossley, 2022). However, as previously discussed, tensions emerged between the priorities of individual nations and those of the broader region, eventually leading to the establishment of national universities (Caston, 1993; Groves, 2020). This evolution signified a desire for greater national leadership for educational destinies and the development of academic programmes aligned to specific national development strategies (Altbach et al., 2009; Groves, 2020). Although USP's regional mandate did foster greater collaboration, capacity building and educational access across member nations (McCall, 1984; Naidu, 2008), critiques emerged around the equity of access and resource distribution (Groves, 2020). As the administrative centre of USP was located in Fiji, concerns were frequently raised about its disproportionate benefits and, therefore, the effectiveness of this model (Groves, 2019).

The rise of national universities reflects a desire to counteract these imbalances and to promote the specificity of contextually responsive priorities, Indigenous knowledge, and cultural preservation (Groves & Tautunu, 2021). Political and linguistic factors have influenced the location of institutions, language of instruction and curriculum types (Crocombe & Meleisea, 1989). Contemporary higher education in Moana Oceania faces numerous challenges, including limited resources, brain drain, and a reliance on foreign aid and partnerships (Puamau & Teasdale, 2005), as well as balancing national priorities, regionalism, and internationalisation (Groves, 2020; Jones, 1989). Furthermore, external forces, frequently linked to foreign aid, can unduly influence institutional strategies, potentially limiting academic freedom and cultural relevance (Groves, 2020). The reliance on aid-funded scholarships can also perpetuate a 'brain drain', as graduates may seek educational opportunities overseas (Healey, 2022). The integration of technical and vocational education also required careful management to avoid compromising quality and relevance (Johansson-Fua & Crossley, 2022). Technological disparities and geographical isolation exacerbate inequities in access and quality. Nevertheless, digital platforms and regional cooperation initiatives have shown promise in expanding access, particularly in remote and rural areas (Sharma et al., 2020). The evolution of higher education

in Moana Oceania necessitates a critical examination of power dynamics, cultural preservation, and the pursuit of equitable and relevant educational opportunities (Crocombe & Meleisea, 1989). The landscape is further complicated by climate change, which disproportionately impacts the island nations of Moana Oceania and has implications for the sustainability and mobility of higher education institutions (Campbell & Barnett, 2010). In response, higher education in Moana Oceania is increasingly positioned not only as a driver of development but also as a site of resistance and resilience in the face of global challenges. There is also a growing push to Indigenise curricula and pedagogies to reflect better and preserve Pacific epistemologies and values (Sanga & Thaman, 2009; Thaman, 2003).

Unsettling Higher Education Internationalisation

Much like the free markets of capitalism drive neoliberalism, a primary driver of higher education internationalisation favours the needs of the Global North, also guided by market demands, and constructed and delivered through a neoliberal frame of reference. Studies on the forces of globalisation in higher education (Burnett, 2008; Van Damme, 2000) have discussed “globalization and internationalization as mutually reinforcing ideas (Maringe et al., 2013, p.17), the rhetorical application of internationalisation, Global North dominance and privileging of Euro-western knowledges, lack of equity and recognition of [I]ndigenous knowledges²² and the commodification of international students and corporatization of higher education structures. (Bradley, 2017; Dawson, 2020; de Wit, 2019, 2023; George Mwangi, 2017; Hagenmeier, 2015; Hayes et al., 2021; Marginson, 2009; Marginson & Xu, 2023).

Higher education has become a global economic industry. The internationalisation of higher education has been leveraged as a catalyst for institutions to become highly competitive and increasingly focused on revenue generation and global prestige (Pike, 2012). There are an estimated 235 million students enrolled in higher education institutions around the world (UNESCO, 2023a), with approximately 7.2 million of these outside of their home countries (Böhm & Meares, 2002), of which just eight countries serve as the primary host countries: United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Australia, China, Canada and Japan. The financial contributions of international students to host country economies are significant, with estimates for the 2007-2008 academic year as high as \$17.65 billion in the United States (NAFSA, 2008) and £3.26 billion in the United Kingdom (Universities UK, 2009).

²² Indigenous knowledges: the development and intergenerational mobility of knowledge unique to a specific place and peoples.

Higher education institutions have leaned into global ranking schemes to build and highlight their reputations and leveraged their competitive positions to recruit talented students and staff. International recruitment has a significant impact on what is referred to as ‘brain drain’, or migration in pursuit of education elsewhere, and further challenges universities in the recruited country to retain talent and compete globally. Additionally, this competitive positioning and global branding position Euro-Western higher education as premier, given it is consistently ranked among the top (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015; THE, 2022). The neoliberal drivers of higher education internationalisation have led to a fast-paced, competitive scramble for positioning, resulting in a lack of clarity about how it is defined and implemented. As previously presented, the most cited definition of internationalisation in the higher education sector is that of Knight (2004), who describes the phenomenon as the “process of integrating international, intercultural and global dimensions into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (p. 11). Subsequently, more HEIs began establishing international centres within their institutions, hiring dedicated staff, and offering postgraduate degrees in global higher education. Thereby, an increase in research on the phenomenon of HEI internationalisation has led to reconsideration of the definition and associated concepts (de Wit, 2023; Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Hunter, 2015).

In the early 1960s, U.S. HEIs adopted a development-focused approach to global engagement, positioning themselves to deliver ‘technical assistance and development cooperation’ (de Wit, 2001, p. 122). A few decades later, additional regions (W. Europe, Canada, Australia) also began to position their global engagement in these ways (de Wit, 2001). Just like models of development (Aporosa, 2012; Carter, 2023), models of internationalisation cannot be transferred across regions, cultures, knowledges, and worldviews. A rise in scholars calling for new approaches to internationalisation has questioned its definition, methods, and impacts. Much of the literature that defines internationalisation reflects neutral value systems (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021; Knight, 2012) and, in many instances, continue to reflect a system predominantly driven by neoliberalism that perpetuates academic and epistemic dominance situated in the Global North (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021; Maringe & de Wit, 2016; Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022).

Research on higher education internationalisation has been strongly driven by scholar-practitioners striving to standardise definitions and approaches to gain greater recognition for the field within the academic-disciplinary complex. The establishment of so-called ‘best practices’ provided opportunities to measure the outputs and outcomes of internationalisation

activities like international partnerships, study abroad and international student satisfaction. Practitioner-researchers from more privileged nations of the Global North led the research movement in higher education internationalisation; thereby, much of the research utilised their situational and positional lens. As discussed in Chapter 1: Research Contexts (Introduction), this research further contributed to “academic imperialism” by continuing to centre epistemologies from the Global North (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021, p. 567). However, a rising voice from the Global South has emerged, thereby diversifying and critiquing internationalisation practices and research.

Research originating in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Moana Oceania, or from scholars connected to the Global South, has called for the status quo in global higher education internationalisation to be unsettled, decolonised and to confront inequities in power. The neoliberal underpinnings of internationalisation behaviours are a strong force in contention to these calls. An example of this is the commodification of international students as a primary source of revenue to cover HEIs' deficits in the Global North (Hegarty, 2014). In fact, the quantity of international students has been used as a metric of institution competitiveness (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009), and the economic contribution by international students has been used as data to advocate for local and national policies (Baumgartner, 2022; Brimmer, 2019; Marginson, 2009; Ortiz et al., 2015; Vickers & Bekhradnia, 2007). This near reliance on the importation of international students as a trade commodity drains the knowledge systems of low- and middle-income countries with no guarantee of a return, further ‘draining’ these countries of the Global South of knowledge (Beine et al., 2008; Docquier et al., 2007; Dumont et al., 2007; Liki, 2001).

Transnational education (TNE) is a burgeoning internationalisation practice amongst well-resourced higher education institutions of the Global North, in which they establish branch campuses outside their home countries or station academic staff in host countries with the express purpose of delivering academic programmes leading to degree qualifications. This importation of curricula and knowledge delivery (pedagogy) can be another form of academic imperialism, as described previously, unless it is contextually translated, and local academics are integrated in its development and implementation. This practice poses an even greater challenge for higher education institutions competing for students in their home countries (Huang, 2007; Koehn, 2013; Koehn & Obama, 2014).

Three areas of higher education internationalisation should be further highlighted, as they significantly shape the regional focus of this thesis. The first reflects the increasing marketisation of higher education through league tables and ranking schemes. These global

ranking systems (e.g., Times Higher Education²³, QS²⁴, and Shanghai²⁵) have further divided higher education institutions worldwide as they compete for higher rankings (THE, 2022). This has also impacted international partnership strategies, in which institutional ranking is a criterion for developing new partnerships (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Marginson & Van der Mende, 2007; Shahjahan et al., 2017). Secondly, the dominance of English-medium education has further privileged the Global North and continues to isolate and create barriers to the recognition of non-English-speaking scholars' scholarship (Kirkpatrick, 2009; Le Ha & Barnawi, 2015). Finally, the 'publish or perish' environment for individuals working in academia has resulted in less resourced scholars and those from the Global South being less competitive globally because of English language dominance, limited access to resources, competition and costs associated with some publishing (Canagarajah, 1996; Castiello-Gutiérrez & Whatley, 2023; Curry & Lillis, 2004; Di Bitetti & Ferreras, 2017; Smeyers et al., 2014).

There has been no substantive literature that explores the phenomena of higher education internationalisation, broadly or specifically, in the island nations of Moana Oceania. References can be drawn from other regions (e.g., the Caribbean and South Africa) that share some similar characteristics, such as island nations, the role of development in higher education, brain drain, and Indigeneity in higher education. There has been robust scholarship in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand on their experiences with internationalisation in higher education. However, context is critical, and it is unlikely to be applicable or appropriate to the realities of the higher education sector in Moana Oceania.

Interfacing Epistemologies & Ontologies in Higher Education

Although the field of higher education internationalisation has developed a portfolio of research, 'best practices', and a robust industry, knowledge mobility predates modern institution-based knowledge transfer systems. Indigenous peoples have well-developed systems of knowledge acquisition, transfer and adaptation. Often, this included people's mobility beyond their own lands and seas to interact with other groups. Through these knowledge mobilities, specific knowledge was shared freely, while others remained sovereign within their own communities (Sanga & Reynolds, 2022). As calls for decolonisation and Indigenisation increase, we see a slow rise in academic journals expanding the languages of

²³ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings> (THE, 2022)

²⁴ <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings>

²⁵ <https://www.shanghairanking.com/>

articles, the inclusion of Indigenous research methodologies, and greater representation of Indigenous peoples within the academy (Hemi & Aporosa, 2021; Hoskins & Jones, 2022). There remains a long path forward towards equity as the global knowledge system which is reliant on financial and political capital will continue to privilege the powers and influences of racialised capitalism and the Global North (Hart, 2010; Hemi & Aporosa, 2021; Marginson & Xu, 2023; Matapo, 2021b; Nabobo-Baba, 2004; Sanga, 2004; Thaman, 2006; Vaughn & Ambo, 2022). Matapo and McFall-McCaffery (2022) propose a *vā* knowledge ecology as a response to the global knowledge economy, where through “intentional foregrounding of Pacific philosophical paradigms” (p. 129) shift the Eurocentric, capitalist and individualist orientation of academic institutions to reflect a shared knowledge environment that goes beyond equity through including the most marginalised as “active agents” (p.130) within the system. (Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022; Sanga, 2004). Self-determination is one of the hallmarks of Indigenisation and decolonisation philosophies. Without active inclusion and agency of Indigenous peoples in academic institutions, they will continue to replicate colonial legacies (Kickett et al., 2023; Smith & Munshi, 2023).

At the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a plan titled ‘Agenda 21’ was the first instance in which an international, multilateral organisation formalised the incorporation and valuation of Indigenous knowledges. In Chapter 26, they state, “[Indigenous peoples] have developed over many generations a holistic traditional scientific knowledge of their lands, natural resources and environment” (UN, 1992, p. 279). It goes on to call for the “recognition of their values, traditional knowledge and resource management practices with a view to promoting environmentally sound and sustainable development” (UN, 1992, p.279). While this was considered monumental at the time, in reviewing Agenda 21, there have been some successes within the United Nations superstructure in developing programmes that incorporate Indigenous knowledge and communities (UN, 1992), but this has not been the case in academia. Euro-Western science continues to dominate, even when Indigenous knowledges have been the primary source for localised solutions. Global challenges are often the result of behaviours in the Global North, with the most significant impact felt in the Global South. Areas of the Global South are used to extract data to solve the problems of the Global North. As stated by philosopher Rosa Braidotti (2023), “Knowledge practices of the marginalised are essential to sustainable futures.” The integration of Indigenous knowledge and values into policy can build confidence in where Indigenous peoples can contribute. On the other hand, the “silencing of [I]ndigenous intellectuals” (Sanga, 2023) is another form of intellectual colonisation.

All too often, research has utilised the Global South to extract data and knowledge for the benefit of the Global North. I recognise that Euro-Western researchers frequently find research participants to exploit rather than develop trusting relationships with them and their communities. This is the case as well for Moana Oceania, where “research...is undertaken overwhelmingly by non-islanders, and the major beneficiaries from it are non-islander researchers, institutions and nations” (Crocombe & Meleisea, 1988, p.356). Chapter 3 (Research Design) outlines how these concerns were addressed in practice.

Contextualising Research in Moana Oceania

Every researcher has multiple identities and experiences that shape their so-called insider and outsider characteristics (Arthur, 2010; Crossley et al., 2015; McNess et al., 2015; Milligan, 2016) and relational positionalities (Chin et al., 2022; Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019; Holmes, 2020; Kamlongera, 2021; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). How they choose to enact such positionalities when engaging in research spaces may dictate the outcomes of their research. In Moana Oceania, relationality is a shared value that spans the region’s cultures and must be negotiated and nurtured to protect those relationships and acknowledge the contexts, expectations and dynamics of those spaces (Airini et al., 2010; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001; Johansson-Fua, 2016, 2020, 2022; Ka’ili, 2005; Reynolds, 2016; Sanga & Reynolds, 2020; Thaman, 2008; Vaioleti, 2006; Wendt, 1999). Fasavalu and Reynolds (2019) discuss how relational approaches facilitate learning opportunities where “relational obligations and expectations [are] opportunities for researchers to seek agency, particularly over their development and research contribution” (p. 12). Relationality is negotiated over time (*tā*) and space (*vā*) with the utilisation of Indigenous methodologies, such as *talanoa* (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Vaioleti, 2006), *tok stori* (Sanga et al., 2018; Sanga & Reynolds, 2021a) and *storian* (Van Allen, 2012; Warrick, 2009), and employing ethics familiar and reflective of the cultural contexts (Anae, 2016; Sanga & Reynolds, 2022). Given the previous sections of the literature review, we must once again consider the contexts of Moana Oceania. Matapo and McFall-McCaffery (2022) sum it up quite well, “Pacific [I]ndigenous epistemologies constitute relational ties (*vā*) between collective knowledges. As a result, it is a challenge for Pasifika.²⁶ to negotiate knowledge constructs within the individualised, competitive or property-owning academy” (p.128).

²⁶ The name has been given to people of heritage in Moana Oceania that reside in Aotearoa New Zealand.

There has been a fair amount of research exploring the understandings of *vā* (relationality) and Indigenous methodologies in educational research by scholars of the Moana Oceania (Anae, 2016, 2019; Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022; Sanga, 2004; Sanga & Reynolds, 2020; Sanga et al., 2022). While there are nuanced differences in how the relational space (*vā*) is understood, scholars generally describe it as the spaces between and among people where connections are formed. These spaces are not only physical but also spiritual, emotional, temporal, and even conceptual, as is the case with the research space. Scholars discuss the importance of time and care within these spaces, such that the interconnectedness formed is constantly nurtured (e.g., *teu le vā* in Samoa, *tauhi vā* in Tonga, etc.) and negotiated to ensure it is sustained over time (Anae, 2016; Airini et al., 2010; Johansson-Fua, 2020; Māhina, 2010; Tuagalu, 2008; Wendt, 1999). Although it is expected that a researcher understands the contexts in which they negotiate their relationality, this understanding is also highly dependent on the people and places involved (Johansson-Fua, 2020). Within a research context, the researcher needs to be not only highly reflexive and aware of their positionality (Ryan, 2015) but also highly aware of local contexts, the people with whom they will be sharing in these spaces, and the places where they will be negotiating their relationality. These considerations all affect the relational dynamics.

Relationality is, as stated by Johansson-Fua (2020), “a space for deeper engagement with, and learning from, the context” (p.53). Researchers have multiple identities that can dictate how others relate to them within the *vā*. Hence, an ethical and aware researcher needs to be quite mindful of how they are present throughout these spaces, so as not to impose. These ideas have been reiterated by Sanga and Reynolds (2017), who state that “the passage of time, identity continues to be negotiated in a journey which requires clarity, transparency and reflexivity” (p. 201). If equity is a desired and expected norm within such relational spaces, I refer to Ng (2003), who states that “understanding power as a relational property is therefore key to working with inequality and difference in education” (p.198). There has been limited research exploring the dynamics of relational space within the context of internationalisation partnerships in the higher education sector globally, let alone in Moana Oceania.

There have been substantial discussions about the space occupied by non-Oceanian peoples researching the region. Milligan (2016) discusses the *knowledgeable outsider*, or the ‘in-betweener’ (p.249), to deconstruct the dichotomy of insider-outsider research, where she posits the possibility that an ‘outsider’ can meaningfully engage in the spaces of others through reflexivity and acknowledgement of contexts. To be a *knowledgeable outsider*, Milligan (2016) suggests, researchers have “multiple and shifting identities in different contexts” (Lee et al.,

2018, p.122) and through their choice of methodologies can successfully engage in the co-construction of knowledge and thereby “shift the power dynamics” (Milligan, 2016, p.238). Porisky & Glas (2023) propose the concept of “credible visitors” as a “performative aspect of positionality founded on humility and reflexivity and enacted through showcasing competence and engaging in transparency” (p. 51). “Through a willingness to be engaged in a relational space,” Johansson-Fua (2020, p. 52) presents experiences where “the outsider and the insider became present to one another. Through the act of *tauhi vā*, practising relationality and demonstrating respect for the people and the land, outsiders became part of the context” (Johansson-Fua, 2020, p.54)

Summary

This chapter has reviewed literature relevant to the study of higher education, policy, regionalism, internationalisation and Indigenous knowledge in relation to Moana Oceania. Through critical, decolonial and relational lenses, the literature review shows that higher education is not a neutral field of institutional development. It is shaped by colonial legacies, neoliberal policies, geopolitical asymmetries, and ongoing struggles over knowledge, authority, relevance, and institutional purpose. These dynamics are significant in Moana Oceania, where higher education institutions serve not only developmental and technical functions, but also political, cultural, symbolic, and epistemological ones.

The literature increasingly calls for higher education in the Global South to be rethought through the lenses of epistemic justice, epistemic plurality, and Indigenous knowledge systems (Connell, 2019; Mbembe, 2016). In Moana Oceania, colonialism, globalisation, and Euro-Western dominated standards have historically marginalised Indigenous languages, knowledges, and ways of being. Global benchmarks, rankings and funding schemes continue to shape the terms through which institutional quality and relevance are assessed, scholars argue for valuation systems that recognise locally generated knowledge, community engagement, cultural affirmation, and Indigenous relationality as central to higher education (Tikly, 2011). Universities in Moana Oceania can be understood as sites through which national and regional agency, identity, sovereignty, interdependence, and alternative futures may be asserted within global higher education discourses.

The review has also shown that national and regional universities in Moana Oceania hold distinctive, though interconnected, roles. National universities are critical institutions for sovereignty, capacity building, cultural affirmation, public policy, and national development.

These institutions go beyond providers of qualifications as they also serve as developmental, political, cultural, and epistemological actors that interpret, adapt, contest, and at times reimagine higher education in relation to their own histories, obligations, relationships, and aspirations (Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Mignolo, 2020; Shahjahan et al., 2017).

Despite growing scholarship on higher education in the region, the review identifies an important gap in understanding how national universities in Moana Oceania negotiate the intersecting pressures of national priorities, regionalism and internationalisation. This negotiation remains insufficiently theorised, particularly from perspectives that centre Indigenous relationality, epistemic and ontological plurality, and the specific institutional realities of national universities in the region. This gap is timely and consequential given the recent growth of national universities across island nations in Moana Oceania and the wider pressures facing higher education, including climate change, digital transformation, geopolitical competition, and shifting development agendas (UNESCO, 2021a).

This research addresses the primary question of how national priorities are centred in national universities of Moana Oceania. It also examines how regionalism and internationalisation shape how universities navigate these inter-scalar and sometimes diverging priorities. It contributes to understanding how universities in the region negotiate global, regional, and national expectations, and how the national universities of Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji exercise institutional agency within complex policy, political, cultural and epistemic environments.

The thesis discussion (Chapter 9) returns to these debates by articulating an alternative model of higher education, the relational university, and a relational approach to internationalisation and knowledge diplomacy grounded in Moana Oceania philosophies.

The next chapter outlines the research design, developed to investigate these questions, including positional, theoretical, methodological, analytical, and ethical commitments that shaped the inquiry.

Chapter 3. Research Design

This chapter sets out the research design, developed to address the aim, objectives, and questions introduced in Chapter 1. In exploring how national priorities are centred in national universities of Moana Oceania, and how these are negotiated through the layered influences of regionalism and internationalisation, the chapter outlines the relational, conceptual, methodological, and ethical foundations of the study. It outlines the researcher's positionality, the theoretical framing of the inquiry, the use of Indigenous and critical qualitative methodologies, the research participants and knowledge-sharing processes, the analytical approach, and the ethical and reflexive commitments that shaped interpretation and representation throughout the study.

Designing this research required culturally responsible and contextually responsive planning to (re)present participants' narratives appropriately and to portray an accurate picture of the phenomenon in question. In Moana Oceania, specifically, it was critical to acknowledge the respective Indigenous philosophies of time and space influenced by the past, present and future (Māhina, 2010). This chapter opens with my journey navigating the research focus and acknowledging my research positionalities (Kamlongera, 2021). To frame the research design, I have purposefully chosen both Euro-Western and Indigenous Moana Oceania approaches, some of which are less recognised or even marginalised in academic research. My goal with this parallel approach is to intentionally not privilege one over the other, but demonstrate that both can have a place and purpose in research spaces if given the space to complement one another (Bartlett et al., 2012; Durie, 2004; Grenier, 1998; Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2013).

Statement of Researcher Journey and Positionality

While Chapter 1 introduced the reflexive stance guiding this thesis, this section elaborates the research journey, positionality, and ethical commitments that shaped the study in practice.

Researcher Journey

There are key experiential markers in my life that have influenced my path into this PhD journey. In 2004, I conducted fieldwork for my Master's thesis with the Maya-K'akchikel communities of present-day Guatemala, employing participatory methodologies (Levy, 2006). In 2005, I worked with the community of Tutereinga marae in Te Puna, near Tauranga, in the

Bay of Plenty (Aotearoa New Zealand), whose primary hapū is Pirirākau of Ngāti Ranginui, to support the education of international students in Māori culture, history, and language. In 2007, I served as a monitor and analyst for the 6th session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. In 2008, I developed the Global Indigenous Network with the mission to connect people and communities working on Indigenous issues; it now has approximately 8,000 members from over 100 countries. From 2020 to 2023, I served on the leadership of the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES), co-facilitating the new and emerging researchers' group (NERO), which provided me with opportunities to deepen my understanding of Moana Oceania educational research and research methodologies. The knowledge I have gained through these and other experiences has taught me to honour and care for the methods and processes by which Indigenous peoples represent their narratives, and to approach academic scholarship as a culturally responsive and respectful scholar-practitioner.

My experiences with Moana Oceania began in 2000 and continued through subsequent visits and learning opportunities. I have an appreciation for and curiosity about the cultures of Moana Oceania, Indigenous research methodologies, and community engagement in education. Through professional, service and academic work in the Moana Oceania, it has become even clearer to me the systemic privileges and imbalances present within tertiary education spaces. It is within these spaces that this research was explored further.

This journey has also been a decolonial one. By this, I do not mean that I have arrived at a settled position outside coloniality, nor that reflexive intentions alone can undo the structural privileges I carry. I understand that my decolonial learning is an ongoing process of recognising how Euro-Western academic norms have shaped my assumptions about knowledge, legitimacy, evidence, research relationships, and institutional value, and then working deliberately to unsettle those assumptions in both thought and practice. In this research, that has meant refusing to treat Euro-Western higher education models as the implicit benchmark against which universities in Moana Oceania should be measured, and instead approaching national universities in the region as knowledge-rich institutions grounded in their own histories, obligations, and aspirations.

This decolonial orientation has also required me to confront how research itself can reproduce extractive relations, especially when participants' knowledge is taken up, translated, and represented through institutional and academic forms that have historically marginalised Indigenous voices. As a non-Indigenous researcher working in Indigenous spaces, I understand

decoloniality as an obligation to listen and engage more carefully, to interpret more cautiously, to remain open to correction, and to create research processes that are more relational, dialogic, and accountable. This includes recognising that participants are not just respondents within a study, but knowledge-holders whose ways of making meaning should shape not only what is heard, but how the research is conducted, understood and written.

Researcher Positionalities

Positionality is context-specific, relational, and must be interrogated on an ongoing basis by the researcher and the research participants, as the researcher's identities and positionalities will impact the research. It may be that the researcher will be of a different race, ethnicity and religion from participants. Additionally, assumptions will be made during initial interactions as the relationship between the researcher and the participant is being developed. It is through this relational development process that opportunities for trust, respect, reciprocity and humility can be created, and relational positionality begins to emerge. This should be done with great care and mindfulness, through active listening and humbly receiving the wisdom that is being shared, as well as acknowledging the time given by the participants throughout the research (Chin et al., 2022; Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019; Holmes, 2020; Rowe, 2014; Ryan, 2015; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). As is customary in Moana Oceania and a key relational ethic, I provided clarity about my connections to places and spaces, as well as my philosophical and practical approaches to conducting research.

I am a 3rd-generation born in the United States of America (U.S.A), with heritage in present-day Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ireland. Born and raised in a working-class household in a diverse community near New York City, I had the privilege of learning about and engaging with people and cultures from around the world. I am married to an Indigenous Argentine man and maintain a bicultural, bilingual household. Therefore, immigrant and working-class realities are central to my worldview.

With 25 years of experience in tertiary education globally, I am keenly aware of the inclination to lean on the most familiar, which, for me, has primarily been within Euro-Western, settler-colonial spaces. Although this may be the most familiar, I have lived and worked in countries and cultures less familiar. These collective experiences are where I have witnessed structural and systemic privileging and actively work to redress this in my own practices. From my experiences engaging with cultures other than my own, I always focus on building relationships, using practical, context-specific communication strategies, and supporting individuals and

institutions on their own journeys. Professionally, when engaging in collaborative initiatives with international colleagues or partners, I focus most of my energy on building strong, sustained relationships with those involved; becoming more familiar with their positionalities, worldviews, cultural contexts, motivations, and practices; and having them become more familiar with mine. By doing so, I aim to overtly de-centre the Euro-Western dominance and negotiate a space of epistemic plurality and mutuality.

In research spaces, I have diligently worked to engage participants throughout the process. Although I may be named as the ‘researcher’, I do not own the research, nor the knowledge shared by participants. To maximise the authenticity of the study, it is critical for me first to understand the contexts of the various spaces, places, and peoples, and to adapt as necessary. Without genuine relationality and negotiated positionality, it would be less feasible to conduct research that honours participants' narratives and representations. For me, culture can have many meanings and intersections, and I can only truly begin to understand them through a relational approach that gives time to familiarity with the contexts behind the contexts (Ahonen et al., 2014; Airini et al., 2010; Spratt & Coxon, 2020).

While it is impossible to remove the inherent power and privileges of my positionality completely, I strive to create balanced, non-colonising relationships, as Moana Jackson (2020) states, “such transformations must confront implacability of a power unjustly taken” (pp. 149-150). My understanding of the Euro-Western-centric (Escobar, 2007) and exploitative extraction of Indigenous knowledges (Levy, 2006), and the importance of diligent reflexivity throughout research, continues to inform my engagement with collaborative and context-centred research design and methodologies. As a non-Indigenous person engaging in Indigenous spaces, it has and continues to be my responsibility to embrace how participants share knowledge with me, what it means to honour, (re)present and sense-make relational positionality as ethical, cultural, values-based, mana-enhancing²⁷ and nuanced spaces (Chin et al., 2022; Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019).

Within this research, I aimed to de-centre Euro-Western, settler-colonial approaches to tertiary education in Moana Oceania, even as an outsider, by navigating within, around, and outside of the research spaces, utilising collaborative sensemaking (collectively giving meaning to an experience, concept, etc.) and relational ethics. Relationality is a core value in the cultures of

²⁷ Mana is a Māori word, which generally means to connect one’s inherited strengths with the surrounding environments. Mana can be gained or lost because of certain actions. In the context of this research, ‘mana-enhancing’ refers to creating a space where every individual is valued and connected to the research process and is not diminished in any way.

the Moana Oceania, and therefore, it is critical to consider a relational approach to ethics (Anae, 2016, 2019; Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017; Sanga et al., 2018; Spratt & Coxon, 2020). Being mindful of the role of spaces in shaping my positionality as a researcher (physical, worldview, power, etc.), and of how I occupy those spaces, is a critical ongoing negotiation. I constantly confronted my Euro-Western, 'white' otherness, surface-level colonialist image and actively navigated how research participants made meaning with me.

In considering relational positionality, there are various ways to understand and negotiate one's positionality. According to Levy & Wright (forthcoming), these are: position to subject; position to participants; position to contexts; and how others position us as researchers. I constantly critique my knowledge and practices, and explore the tensions of privilege, contexts, cultures, and my positionalities within relational research spaces (Chin et al., 2022; Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019). Therefore, while I have some experiences that can support and strengthen my ability to be reflexive, reflective, relational and intentional in this research, the tensions were continually confronted and negotiated between myself and the participants involved. These tensions included a constant recognition and acknowledgement of my biases through ongoing reflexive documentation (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). Reflexivity as a component of this research is discussed later in this chapter.

Research Focus

This research journeys through the complex and multi-scalar intersections of diverse contexts and knowledge systems. At the centre of the journey are five national universities of Moana Oceania: the National University of Samoa (NUS), Tonga National University (TNU), the Solomon Islands National University (SINU), the National University of Vanuatu (NUV), and Fiji National University (FNU). Each institution has an origin story that presents a meaningful moment in its nation's history and is guided by mandates deeply embedded in its national and cultural contexts. This reality can present both opportunities and tensions when interfacing with global academic structures and regionalism. Alongside participants in this research journey, we explored the dynamics of convergent and divergent intersections in planning for and actualising mandates to meet national priorities within the national university spaces while simultaneously navigating the influences from regionalism and internationalisation. The research intentionally utilised context-responsive and culturally relevant methods and methodologies (Berryman et al., 2013) to position relational narratives at the core of the research 'data' and to support collaborative sensemaking for greater ethical, participatory analysis of that 'data'.

Through discussions of national priorities, regionalism and internationalisation across the various research sites, issues of power, equity and mutuality were confronted. Furthermore, the research explored how diverse worldviews may walk together toward common, mutually beneficial goals. Additionally, there is potential to draw insights from the research process itself, particularly through ontological contributions that are attentive to relational negotiation in mixed and intersectional identity spaces. Although my experiences working in various higher education leadership and management positions strengthened my ability to interface with the organisational culture(s) of each institution and individual during this research, I remained an active learner and humble partner throughout, adapting my engagement as needed.

By describing myself as a humble partner, I do not mean humility as a purely personal disposition or as a rhetorical softening of researcher authority. I use the term to describe an epistemic and ethical stance. Epistemically, humility requires me not enter research spaces as the ‘expert’, and that meanings, priorities, and interpretations that emerge from the study must be shaped through careful attention to the knowledge, relationships, and contexts participants bring. Ethically, humility requires accountability for how I engage, what I ask, how I interpret, and how I represent others’ shared knowledge in this thesis. Interpretively, it requires ongoing caution against over-claiming, premature closure, or translating participants’ meanings into more familiar academic discourse.

Being a humble partner involved approaching the research as a relational process of learning with, not extracting from, participants and institutions. It required patience, active listening, responsiveness to contexts, and a willingness to let the pace, texture, and priorities of dialogue shape the inquiries. It also meant recognising that respectful research in Moana Oceania is not exhausted by the moments of conversation themselves. Humility extends into analysis, sensemaking, writing, and dissemination, where the research remains responsible for honouring participants in ways that are mana-enhancing, relationally accountable, and attentive to the values that underpin the knowledge that has been gifted. These commitments shaped not only my entry into the field, but also the ethical, interpretive, and relational stances I sought to maintain through the research phases.

The following research questions guided the research design, engagement with participants and subsequent documentation of findings:

Primary Research Question: How are national priorities centred in national universities of Moana Oceania?

Secondary Research Questions:

1. What impact does regionalism have on achieving national priorities at national universities in Moana Oceania?
2. What impact does internationalisation have on achieving national priorities at national universities in Moana Oceania?

Theoretical Frameworks

Given the multitude of available theoretical frameworks and my own positionalities within these research spaces, I have chosen to draw on both my more familiar lens and Moana Oceania as guides. This research utilised both a social constructionist framework (Burr, 2015) and the concepts of *motutapu* (Johansson Fua, 2020) and *wansolwara* (Johansson-Fua, 2022) as contextualised lenses for negotiating relationality and sensemaking of the research subject with participants. As the research progressed, it was continually important to employ reflexivity and adapt to any tensions and unplanned opportunities that emerged.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is grounded in the belief that knowledge and ways of thinking are built through one's interactions with their contexts (Burr, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018). The choice to use this paradigm enabled a critical focus on the processes and how they may be negotiated within national universities in Moana Oceania (Hammersley, 2012). As further clarified by Cohen et al. (2018), social constructionism posits that "individuals seek to make meaning of their lives and...the researcher has to examine the situation in question through multiple lenses of the individuals involved, to obtain their definition of the situation, to see how they make sense of their situation and to focus on interactions, contexts, environments and biographies" (p.23). This paradigm recognises that every human is born into a specific context that directly influences how they understand global society and how they communicate about it (Burr, 2015). As Burr (2015) states, "When people talk to each other, the world gets constructed" (p.11). The process, or "dynamics of social interaction" (Burr, 2015, p.11), of relational knowledge development is supportive of the research aim of understanding how national universities of the Moana Oceania maintain their focus on meeting national priorities, while recognising the role of regionalism (PIFS, 2014) and internationalisation. Through a social constructionist lens, it is understood that everyone's perspectives are shaped by their experiences and are relevant and influential in research processes (Burr, 2015). Additionally, as discussed in the Literature Review section, the research phenomenon in question should be descriptive, not prescriptive

(Teferra, 2020a), as we cannot predict future contexts and the individuals involved in the negotiation of priorities at these universities. Using a constructivist approach, both the researcher and the participants actively presented their understandings of the phenomena (Burr, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018).

Motutapu and Wansolwara

It could be contested as to the appropriateness of someone not from the region to utilise Indigenous research methodologies. To acknowledge the contexts and spaces within which this research is located, I felt it was inappropriate to rely solely on a research framework developed outside the region's contexts and ethical approaches.

Tongan scholar Johansson-Fua (2020) presents *motutapu* as a “relational space...to co-explore new and authentic dialogue and conscious action” (p.43). In both cultural and literal senses, *Motutapu* is a sacred island found across many island nations of the sub-region known as Polynesia. Johansson-Fua (2020) describes these as “places of safety for travellers to rest before they continue to journey beyond the reefs, or where outsiders come to negotiate entry to the safe lagoons” (p.43). In her research, she presents *motutapu* as a place where negotiating relationality can begin and where contexts are acknowledged, as part of education researchers’ journey towards a sustained, nurtured and connected partnership (Johansson-Fua, 2020). Additionally, at the 2021 Pacific Ministers of Education Forum Meeting, they incorporated *motutapu* as one of 8 ‘posts’ in their research framework, describing it as “a sacred space that symbolises a point of collaboration – where different ideas, agendas and views come together. In this collaborative space, we must recognise the potential to create more meaningful and worthwhile understandings of the regional educational context, but must also recognise the unspoken tensions, competing agendas and rather messy context of *Motutapu*. Further to this, a relational approach should be encouraged through dialogue and an openness to co-exploring new ideas and solutions” (SPC, 2021a, p.2). It is within the *motutapu* that this thesis research was negotiated between me and the research participants, as well as a lens through which participants may have observed or participated in the negotiation of priorities within national universities of Moana Oceania.

In a complementary manner, Johansson-Fua (2022) advances the concept of *wansolwara*, a Solomon Islands Pijin-language term meaning “one salt water,” as a place-based, Indigenous, dialogic, and relational space for regional collaboration in education and development. In its

original linguistic usage, *wansolwara* refers to the shared ocean that connects diverse islands, languages and peoples. This imagery of “one salt water” is mobilised to foreground a regional identity grounded in the ocean as a connector rather than a divider. As a research lens, *wansolwara* is both metaphor and praxis. It invites Pacific educators and leaders to reclaim ownership of the structures and processes of regionalism, reconfiguring them to centre Indigenous knowledge systems and collective responsibility for sustainable futures (PIFS, 2024b). Within Pacific scholarship and policy work linked to PacREF, *wansolwara* is used to describe a platform for regional collaboration in literacy and education research, through which multi-country studies are designed, Pacific partners hold data ownership, and emerging Pacific researchers are mentored within Indigenous research protocols (PIFS, 2018; UNESCO, 2025c, 2025d). This further positions *wansolwara* as a living, oceanic ethic of working together across Moana Oceania, complementing the more intimate, island-based relationality of *motutapu* in this thesis.

Why Multiple Frameworks?

The choice to utilise multiple conceptual frameworks acknowledges my positionality in relation to the research participants, how participants may have perceived my positionalities, and the research focus itself (Ryan, 2015). This research acknowledged the presence of multiple contexts (Crossley, 2010; Spratt & Coxon, 2020), centred equity rather than privileging a prevailing research approach, and sought to limit asymmetrical power dynamics. As I built trusting relationships, utilising an appropriate lens of inquiry strengthened relationality, engagement, and participation among the research participants. It repositioned and elevated Indigenous Moana Oceania dialogic mediums and research paradigms that are often suppressed within the global academic economy. I worked alongside research participants, giving presence to both frameworks, acknowledged and honoured participants' voices and epistemologies, and demonstrated reciprocity in knowledge exchange and equity in the relational spaces.

Research Methodological Framing

This research integrated multiple methodological approaches: critical (Indigenous) ethnography, descriptive case studies and Moana Oceania relational methodologies, including *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian*. Critical (Indigenous) ethnography positions the research as an active and reflexive process oriented towards social change, while the descriptive case study approach contextualises national universities of Moana Oceania in ways that elevate their

narratives within critical global debates (Anderson, 1989; Fitzpatrick & Allen, 2017; McNess et al., 2015). Alongside these approaches, *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian* are positioned not simply as dialogic methods for generating data, but as Indigenous methodologies grounded in relationality, reciprocity, contextual responsiveness, and ethical responsibility. As expressions of Moana Oceania relationality, they shape the research design, research positionality, engagement approaches, processes of collaborative sensemaking, and the interpretation and representation of knowledge. This methodological framing acknowledges that dialogue in this study is more than a tool of inquiry, but a relational and epistemological orientation through which knowledge is gifted, co-constructed, and made accountable to the peoples, places, and institutions from which it emerges (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021a, 2023; Sanga et al., 2018; Vaioleti, 2006; Warrick, 2009, 2011).

Talanoa, Tok Stori, and Storian as Indigenous Research Methodologies

In this study, *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian* are not approached as techniques solely for collecting participants' narratives. They are understood as Indigenous methodologies that carry their own ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments, and which therefore shape the logic of the research as a whole. To position them only as methods would risk reducing them to culturally adapted instruments within an otherwise Euro-Western research design. Instead, they are relational ways of knowing, engaging, and sensemaking that influence how the research is entered, how dialogue is sustained, how understanding is co-constructed, and how knowledge is interpreted and represented.

As Indigenous research methodologies, *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian* are grounded in relationality, reciprocity, attentiveness to context, and respect for the social and ethical dimensions through which knowledge is gifted. They assume that knowledge does not simply reside within individuals waiting to be extracted, but emerges through relational encounters, dialogue, trust, obligation, and shared reflections. They shape more than the moment itself. They inform the behaviour and positioning of the researcher, the rhythms and textures of engagements with participants and institutions, the interpretation of what is said and unsaid, and the responsibility to ensure that representation remains accountable to the peoples and contexts from which the knowledge arises.

This methodological positioning is critically important in research concerned with higher education in Moana Oceania, where questions of policy, institutional purpose, and knowledge-making cannot be separated from histories of colonialism, development interventions, and

epistemic marginalisation. Framing *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian* as methodologies enables the study to move beyond inclusion at the level of method and towards a research design in which Indigenous relational logics inform the conduct, analysis, and ethical orientation of the inquiry itself.

Critical (Indigenous) Ethnography

This research aims to (re)present Indigenous Moana Oceania narrative conceptualisations of purpose and relevance within national universities, with consideration of the balance of national, regional, and international priorities. A critical ethnographic methodology facilitates a confrontation with the asymmetrical power relations and epistemological hegemony that are most often found within global higher education systems and structures (Anderson, 1989; Cohen et al, 2018; Gordon, 2017). I have integrated elements of critical Indigenous theories (Azmat & Masta, 2021; Dyck et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick & Allen, 2017; Hokowhitu et al., 2021; Olsen, 2018) within the critical ethnographic methodology (hence the use of Indigenous in parentheses) to ground the critical lens further and strengthen the relevance to the contexts of this research. Through the application of context-specific, relational, and dialogic methods, collaborative sensemaking, and ongoing reflexivity, the research has the potential to highlight successful strategies of national universities within the Moana Oceania regional context that centre national priorities while remaining mindful of both regional and global relevance. As outlined in Table 2 (below), I have followed Cohen et al.’s (2018) five stages of a critical ethnography (pp. 296-297), as follows:

Table 02.

Stages of Critical Ethnography.

Stage 1	“Compiling the primary record through the collection of monological data”	Through reflexivity, I identified my initial assumptions and documented objective observations from a review of the institution’s approach to priority setting.
Stage 2	“Preliminary reconstructive analysis”	Using broad-level coding, I highlighted the underlying structural, societal, systemic, and colonial influences on the observations and assumptions from stage 1. This stage facilitated more profound reflexivity, offered greater guidance for stage three, and challenged my own assumptions.
Stage 3	“Dialogical data	I engaged participants in dialogic sessions through <i>talanoa / tok stori / storian</i>

	collection”	methodologies. Greater validity was achieved through using this approach, as they are inherently designed to promote democratisation in dialogue and active listening, without pre-formulated, structured questions. In this stage, I gained perspectives from those experiencing the research phenomena, which raised challenges to or reinforced some of the assumptions or understandings from the previous two stages.
Stage 4	“Discovering system relations”	This stage included a validation of transcriptions by participants to ensure their intended meaning was clear and accurate. An initial review of verified transcripts revealed common thematic areas (codes) emerging from participants, which were used to develop prompts for collaborative sensemaking. This document was then shared with participants in the respective case study for their sensemaking of the initial findings.
Stage 5	“Using system relations to explain findings”	This final stage sought social constructs to sensemake the dialogic knowledge shared and the monologic data collected. As Cohen et al. (2018) state, “...the move is from describing a situation to understanding it, to questioning it, and to changing it” (p. 297). In this phase of the research, the critical (Indigenous) ethnography methodology provided insights through collaborative sensemaking, specific to each case study, to facilitate a more authentic (re)presentation of the case study analysis.

Source/Notes: The first two columns from Cohen et al., 2018, pp. 296-297. In the final column, I describe how I followed those stages in this research.

Through utilising a critical ethnography methodology, I aimed to foreground and unsettle the issues and complexities of asymmetrical power relations within the global academy, epistemological/ontological/axiological hegemony, and navigate multiple layers of relevance in tertiary education planning within the contexts of national universities of Moana Oceania. Through pairing the frameworks of social constructionism and *motutapu/wansolwara* (Johansson-Fua, 2020, 2022) with the critical (Indigenous) ethnography methodology (Cohen et al., 2018), I began to focus on the processes that have led to dominance and privileging. The social constructionist framework (Burr, 2015) positioned the research lens to confront the colonial legacies and continuities in higher education, as well as the epistemic singularity and power asymmetry often present in university priority-setting (Azmat & Masta, 2021; Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2013). The critical (Indigenous) ethnography (Cohen et al., 2018) guides and facilitates the research path through intentional unpacking of the researcher self, elevating

participants' narratives and supporting the relational imperative within the Indigenous contexts of Moana Oceania.

Descriptive Case Studies

The second research methodology framing this study is multiple descriptive case studies. Five national universities, each from a different country of Moana Oceania, served as the subject of each case study. The five case studies included were:

1. SAMOA: [National University of Samoa](#) (NUS)
2. TONGA: [Tonga National University](#) (TNU)
3. SOLOMON ISLANDS: [Solomon Islands National University](#) (SINU)
4. VANUATU: [National University of Vanuatu](#) (NUV)
5. FIJI: [Fiji National University](#) (FNU)

Each country provided unique historical, contemporary, and cultural contexts for exploring the research questions. Simons (2009) describes case study research as exploring the complexities of the world through analysing multiple perspectives within a clearly defined sample unit, and where “context[s] [are] a powerful determinant of both causes and effects” (Cohen et. al., 2018, p.376). Through utilising a case study approach, I gained a textured understanding of the complexities by which national universities in Moana Oceania navigate balancing multiple scales of relevance and priorities, which can converge or diverge. The contexts were positioned to speak for themselves through centring research participants' narratives. The cases have a descriptive, detailed, and narrative focus, in which diverse perspectives on the research questions were permitted, and reflexivity was continually interrogated. The case study elements, as framed by Thomas (2011) and Thomas and Meyers (2015), are outlined below:

- **Subject(s):** The national universities of Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji
- **Object / Explanandum:** Moana Oceania national university prioritisation & relevance.
- **Purpose:** Instrumental (gain insights from Indigenous Moana Oceania experiences and perspectives on negotiating the planning processes of centring national relevance at national universities and their aspirational approaches to the phenomena)
- **Approach:** Descriptive, narrative accounts (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009)
- **Process:** Multiple, parallel cases (running simultaneously and independently)

Regarding the reliability and validity of this research, case studies do not require a large number of cases, as each case is representative only of itself and does not mandate broader societal

impact. In addition, the descriptive, narrative approach to the case studies allows readers to engage and draw connections and significance between the cases and their own experiences. To strengthen the reliability and validity of the case studies, the following identified validity aspects (Cohen et al., 2018, pp. 381-382) were applied:

- **Construct Validity:** A glossary of key terms to be used in this research was created and can be found in Appendix A.
- **Internal Validity:** The analysis of the case studies drew directly from the knowledge shared and subsequently validated through collaborative sensemaking with participants.
- **External Validity:** The temporal, geographic, cultural/ethnographic, organisational and other contextual components are articulated to frame each case study.
- **Concurrent & Convergent Validity:** A diverse set of relevant stakeholders participated, yielding meaningful illustrations of the research questions. The *talanoa / tok stori / storian* sessions, as well as critical analyses of relevant documents, served as multiple sources of knowledge and as additional pathways to concurrent and convergent validity.
- **Ecological Validity:** The unique features of the case studies' contexts are discussed in detail in each case study chapter, in particular Indigenous forms of knowledge sharing dialogues (e.g., *talanoa, tok stori, storian*, etc.), relationality, epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies, national priorities, etc.
- **Reliability:** The goal of case study work is not to produce a study that can be replicated or to be understood as parallel for comparison. Doing so will likely only replicate the hegemony of neoliberal global higher education, which places some institutions as 'better' and others as having deficits. Through the collaborative sensemaking process with research participants, the research's reliability has been verified.
- **Researcher Bias(es):** My subjectivity and initial assumptions were interrogated throughout this research process through maintaining a reflexivity field journal. This increased transparency is presented in the case studies, the research discussion, and the conclusions. Additionally, the transcriptions were shared with participants for their review, providing them an opportunity to clarify or expand on their intended meanings as represented. Finally, a draft summary report was provided to each participant to verify that their perspectives and conceptualisations of the phenomena are clear and accurate.

This multi-case study design is also informed by comparative education scholarship that treats contexts not as background details, but as constitutive of educational relevance and institutional

practices. The study aligns with Crossley and Vulliamy's (1984) work in comparative education, which emphasises the importance of cultural and contextual sensitivities in educational inquiry, particularly in settings where externally derived categories can obscure local realities. It also resonates with Bartlett and Vavrus's (2016) comparative case study approach, especially their insistence that educational phenomena must be understood across scales and through their historical, social, and policy entanglements rather than through decontextualised comparison. These perspectives are useful here because the thesis is concerned with understanding how each is situated within intersecting national, regional, and international dynamics, not comparing against each other.

In each case study chapter, I map the national development plan(s) and national university plans, using a simple alignment heuristic to identify how university mandates intersect with broader national priorities. These planning alignment tables are not exhaustive but provide a shared framework for interpreting participants' narratives.

Within the case study research methodology, the goal is not to be representative or draw a generalisation on the phenomena being studied, but to make accessible and illustrative the lived experiences, perspectives, conceptualisations and aspirations of this phenomenon, within a specific time and place, to expand the set of relevant literature on the case study subjects and objects (Merriam, 1998; Simons, 2009; Thomas, 2011; Thomas & Meyers, 2015). According to Yin (2009, p.58), "the more subtle the issue under investigation, the more cases are required in order to rule out rival explanations." These institutional case studies could provide insights for consideration in these countries when negotiating priority setting and developing relevant strategies. The case studies will expand the research portfolio on the diverse historical and cultural contexts of these institutions, strategies to meet national priorities, and conceptualisations of negotiating regional and international expectations.

Research Participants

To gain insights into the research questions in this study, I collaborated with relevant stakeholders at each national university and key external institutions (see Table 3 below). Participants were invited via digital correspondence (e-mail), followed by an optional video meeting to address any queries about the research and their participation. If appropriate and deemed helpful within the cultural context, an invitation was made by someone we both share

in our existing professional or personal networks, or to the senior-most individual in their organisation, as a matter of respect and protocol.

Table 03.

Overview of Case Study Participants

Case Study	Total Participants	Total Minutes of Knowledge Sharing	Sessions & Formats (F2F = Face-to-face)
Samoa	4	453 minutes	4 F2F; 3 virtual
Tonga	8	586 minutes	7 F2F; 1 group <i>talanoa</i> with 2 participants
Solomon Islands	12	728 minutes	11 F2F; 1 group <i>tok stori</i> with 2 participants
Vanuatu	7	459 minutes	7 F2F
Fiji	8	311 minutes	3 F2F; 2 virtual; 3 e-mails
TOTAL	39	2537 minutes (42 hours, 17 minutes)	32 F2F; 5 virtual; 3 e-mails; 2 group <i>talanoa</i>

Language Considerations

In all research locations, English was not necessarily the primary spoken language, or ‘lingua franca’ (see Table 04 below). However, English is an official language in all research sites and the primary language of instruction in tertiary education. English is also a commonly spoken and written language within universities, government, and international institutions. All participants had advanced or native fluency in English. As the researcher, I actively worked to learn and engage with the spoken languages of the research sites to demonstrate respect, honour the language and recognise the inherent privileging of English. However, the research was conducted in English, as this is the primary language in the professional environments at each research site. None of the research participants requested *talanoa/tok stori/storian* dialogues in their native language.

Table 04.

Lingua Franca and Official Languages of the Countries of the Case Studies.

Country	Lingua franca	Official Languages
Samoa	<i>Gagana Sāmoa</i>	<i>Gagana Sāmoa</i> ; English
Tonga	<i>Lea Faka-Tonga</i>	<i>Lea Faka-Tonga</i> ; English
Vanuatu	<i>Bislama</i>	<i>Bislama</i> ; English; French
Solomon Islands	<i>Solomon Aelan Pijin</i>	English
Fiji	<i>Vosa VakaViti (iTaukei)</i> ; Fijian Hindi	English

Although the research was conducted and is being presented in the English language, I will investigate translating any publications produced through this research in journals, such as the [In Our Language: Journal of Pacific Research \(IOL\)](#) (Hemi & Aporosa, 2021), the [Journal of Sāmoan Studies](#) and the [Tokoni Faiako Journal](#). By doing so, the research will be reported back to the research participants' communities in their language. It thereby could have a broader impact and reach within the nations where the study was focused. In my opinion, this is an ethical obligation.

Research Methods (Knowledge Sharing)

While this section discusses *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian* in relation to knowledge-sharing practices, they are understood in this thesis more broadly as Indigenous research methodologies that shape the relational, interpretive, and ethical foundations of the research as a whole. The motivation for this research is to collaborate with stakeholders to describe the realities of national universities that reflect the contexts and cultural landscapes of Moana Oceania. I recognise that Indigenous peoples are guardians of their knowledge and must be partners throughout the research project. Participation is critical for collaborative research and reflects Indigenous research methodologies present throughout Moana Oceania (Cammock et al., 2021; Milligan, 2016). According to Naepi (2019), “Pacific research methodologies refer to Indigenous research that is conducted from the ontological and epistemological standpoint of Pacific peoples. Pacific research methodologies are an act of decolonial resistance that recognizes the legitimacy of Pacific ontologies and epistemologies, enabling research that is

truly reflective of Pacific peoples. They are a response to colonial research patterns that have framed and stereotyped Pacific peoples in problematic ways” (p.1).

Cultural guidance was provided by the research supervision team (in particular, Associate Professor David Taufui Mikato Fa’avae and Dr S ‘Apo’ Aporosa), who have heritage, relational, geographic and discipline-specific expertise in Moana Oceania research; the professional networks of the researcher; and post-graduate peers at the University of Waikato and other universities. They provided support in the following areas:

- Introductions to prospective participants or institutions, if appropriate;
- Guidance to the researcher (me) on research design; and
- Support in designing the collaborative sensemaking analytical methodology.

This research activates the Moana Oceania dialogic and relational methodologies of *talanoa*, *tok stori* and *storian* to support a dialogic and narrative method of knowledge sharing. These context-responsive approaches (Berryman et al., 2013) are familiar forms of relational, dialogic communication in the research locations: *talanoa* (Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji), *tok stori* (Solomon Islands) and *storian* (Vanuatu). There are nuanced differences between these forms, but they do share the absence of a formal structure and a focus on active listening and sharing with the physical and spiritual spaces, and require ongoing, nurturing of the relational time and spaces (Māhina, 2010; Sanga et al., 2018; Sanga & Reynolds, 2023; Vaioleti, 2006, 2013; Warrick, 2009, 2011). The choice to utilise them actively counters the privileging of a Western methodology that could marginalise or negatively impact the purpose and outcomes of this study (Johansson-Fua, 2009; Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Sanga & Reynolds, 2017). This research strives to value and elevate Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies to genuinely represent the realities of the phenomena being studied in a manner that is respectful, reciprocal and done so with humility.

Talanoa (Samoa, Tonga and Fiji)

Talanoa is a form of relationality commonly found in three of the research locations: Samoa, Tonga and Fiji. *Talanoa* is much more than simply a form of discussion, but a space built by those involved through shared listening and sharing without predetermined expectations or agenda (Halapua, 2013, 2015). Vaioleti (2006) is recognised as one of the first scholars to present the long-held practice of *talanoa* as a research methodology. He states that in “...a good *talanoa* encounter, *noa* creates the space and conditions. *Tala* holistically intermingles researchers’ and participants’ emotions, knowing and experiences” (p. 24). When

deconstructing the word and in claiming it as pan-Moana Oceania, Tunufa'i (2016) claims there is a risk to the original meaning in order to fit research needs and interests and has the potential to disempower and detach it from Indigenous knowledges and place it within a more recognisable Euro-Western-oriented construct of traditional research. He recognises the usefulness of *talanoa* as a research tool. Still, he points to its limits as understood with some variety and found only in a few languages of Moana Oceania. As a geographic and cultural outsider to this research space, orienting myself with both the research of *talanoa* as research methodology and the critique provides a more critical lens when considering engaging this research within *talanoa* spaces (Cammock et al, 2021; Fa'avae et al., 2023; Farelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Feetham et al., 2023; Hindley et al., 2021; Tunufa'i, 2016; Vaioleti, 2006, 2013).

***Tok Stori* (Solomon Islands)**

Tok stori is an active, dialogic, mutable and relational form of human interactions found in Melanesia. Sanga et al. (2018) define tok stori as "...a Melanesian expression of commitment to togetherness manifested through engaging in *stori*, a shared narrative which dialogically constructs reality" (p. 8). To respect and honour the research collaborators, it is critical to demonstrate that I value their co-creation of knowledge in this study with a contextualised, relational and place-based ontological method. *Tok stori* is the ideal form for modelling and understanding the space where relationality is negotiated, knowledge is shared, and a commitment is demonstrated. This motivation is further reinforced by Smith (1999), who discusses the role of research mindful of decoloniality, in which the researcher mediates "between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and interests and ways of resisting the Other" (p. 2). Additionally, the utilisation of a recognised form of relational dialogue in this research in the Solomon Islands strengthened knowledge validation among participants who have a shared familiarity with and ownership of this form (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021a, 2023; Sanga et al., 2018).

***Storian* (Vanuatu)**

Storian, a Bislama language term for the 'sharing of words' or 'storytelling', refers to a dialogic medium of communication where relationships, knowledge and shared decision-making are negotiated in Vanuatu, and has long been embedded in *kastom* practice. Van Allen (2012) describes *storian* as accompanying the exchange of knowledge, while Warrick (2009) develops *storian* explicitly as a research approach, defining it as "an umbrella term indicating semi-

structured interview, informal interview, and opportunistic discussion as part of observation” (p. 83), in which the central feature is building relationality with participants. Subsequent work in rural Vanuatu has consolidated *storian* as a participatory *ni-Vanuatu* methodology for engaging communities, foregrounding local voices and everyday strategies of adaptation (Warrick, 2009, 2011). Development and governance initiatives have similarly used “*storian* sessions” and “*storian* conversations” (p. 178) as relational spaces for dialogue around *kastom* governance, meditation and eco-cultural tourism, further underscoring the role of *storian* as a contextually grounded dialogic methodology rather than an interview technique (Rantes, 2021; Vorbach & Ensor, 2022). Regional methodological discussions explicitly place *storian* alongside *talanoa* as an Indigenous Pacific research methodology that centres reciprocity and the co-construction of meaning, in contrast to the more extractive, Euro-Western interview traditions. In this study, *storian* provides a Vanuatu-specific articulation of other Moana Oceania dialogic traditions exemplified by *talanoa* and *tok stori*. It enables research encounters to occur in a manner that *ni-Vanuatu* and other participants in Vanuatu recognise as their own and is consistent with decolonising commitments to de-privilege Euro-Western research demands and elevate Indigenous ways of knowing (Addinsall et al., 2015; Smith, 1999; Warrick, 2011).

Design and Implementation of the *Talanoa/Tok Stori/Storian* Sessions

Each research collaborator participated in at least one *talanoa/tok stori/storian* supported dialogic session. *Talanoa/tok stori/storian* sessions held intentional space for relationship-building, debriefing, and a return to less intense conversation at the end. To honour the traditional form of *talanoa/tok stori/storian*, predetermined questions were absent; instead, a few thematic areas aligned with the research questions were used to facilitate the discussion. However, each session was allowed to flow as the conversation flowed. The *talanoa/tok stori/storian* sessions were conducted with participants at a date, time and location of their choosing. The sessions began with a short description of the research, the *talanoa/tok stori/storian* session, research ethics and a statement of my positionality. However, each session was unique, allowing the discussion to flow. The sessions addressed the primary and two secondary questions, as well as developing a stronger relationship with the participants to build trust and communication. A general outline of the participant sessions is described below (*the themes listed in number three are in no particular order*):

1. Overview of the Research Focus, Process & Ethics

2. Introductions & Positionalities (relational development)
3. Thematically focussed discussion via *talanoa/tok stori/storian* sessions, as follows:

Primary Research Question: How are national priorities centred in national universities of Moana Oceania?

Discussion Themes:

- National university alignment with national priorities
- National perspectives on the university and its role
- National University's engagement with the government
- National University's engagement with the private sector
- Centring relevance and context in strategy & planning
- The convergent and divergent priorities of national priorities, regionalism and internationalisation

Secondary Question #1: What impact does regionalism have on achieving national priorities at national universities in Moana Oceania?

Discussion Themes:

- Opportunities of regionalism
- Challenges of regionalism

Secondary Question #2: What impact does internationalisation have on achieving national priorities at national universities in Moana Oceania?

Discussion Themes:

- Impact of global expectations of tertiary education on the national university
- Negotiating global pressures; What is sacrificed
- Influences and roles of donor agencies and foreign governments in strategies and prioritisation by the national university

As indicated in Table 3 (above), there were two sessions where multiple participants were present, per their request and preference. In these sessions, I took additional care, as discussed by Sim and Waterfield (2019), "Confidentiality and anonymity are potentially problematic because of the researcher's limited control over what participants may subsequently communicate outside the group" (p. 3003). I began these group *talanoa/tok stori/storian* sessions with a collective discussion about expectations for respecting and honouring what is shared during the session, and for not sharing it with others outside the session. However, as Wellings et al. (2000) state, "The nature of the group setting is such that participants are obliged

to express in public what they usually regard as private, and neither the reaction nor the discretion of the group can necessarily be predicted” (p. 256). Participants agreed to these expectations before commencing the sessions.

All *talanoa/tok stori/storian* sessions were digitally recorded, and participants were informed in the consent documents and verbally before commencing the session. I continued to confer with the research supervisory team and other cultural advisers throughout the research journey to ensure that I had considered the intersections of culture with each component of the research, including recording. The success of the *talanoa/tok stori/storian* sessions depended heavily on the relationships I developed with the participants and the trust we built. While culture is one factor that can affect a participant's comfort with recording, their level of research experience, individual sensitivity to communication, and the physical environment can also influence it. Prior to commencing the sessions, I discussed the role of the recording in the research as a continual practice of relational ethics and free, prior and informed consent.

Analytical Methodologies

By utilising qualitative analytical methodologies, this research will be “less likely to decontextualise the experience and accounts of respondents” (Burr, 2015, p. 172). I guided the analytical processes through an adaptation of Cohen et al. (2018, p. 317) steps of qualitative analysis:

1. Highlight analytical domains, based on broad and specific coding categories
2. Create a ‘domain analysis map’
3. Establish relationships and linkages within the analytical map
4. Summarise emergent findings with participants
5. Facilitate collaborative sensemaking with participants
6. Document insights drawn from each case

Upon completing the fieldwork, I began an initial review of the participants’ narratives and identified preliminary themes. To best honour and (re)present participants, I invited them to engage in collaborative sensemaking. Within each theme, I identified narrative passages that exemplified it. This preliminary analysis was provided to the participants, with all narrative passages anonymised to protect confidentiality. Participants reviewed and provided their validations, critiques or alternative interpretations of the preliminary findings. The themes and findings included in each case study chapter evolved from this process.

A critical ethnographic methodology remained present within the analytical process to elevate and confront the issues of inequity and asymmetrical power dynamics. This was essential if this research was to construct a participant-led narrative of how their respective national universities negotiate and navigate centring national priorities and relevance.

Thematic Coding of *Talanoa/Tok Stori/Storian* Sessions

Every effort was made to transcribe all *talanoa/tok stori/storian* sessions promptly to ensure transcriptions could be shared with participants. I provided periodic communication updates to all participants on the status and phase of the research to strengthen their engagement in the research collaboration. This was well received by participants who often responded with enthusiasm and appreciation. Upon receiving the participant's validation of the transcription, I began the thematic coding, which proceeded iteratively. Rather than pre-specifying, I allowed themes to emerge through repeated engagement with the *talanoa/tok stori/storian* transcripts and the collaborative sensemaking. Initial coding combined descriptive labels (e.g. national priorities, regional pressures, knowledge hierarchies, etc.) with concepts drawn from *motutapu*, *wansolwara* and critical policy analysis. As patterns stabilised, the codes were reorganised around the three scales - national, regional and international. This iterative process enabled greater depth within each case and thematic synthesis across cases (Cohen et al., 2018).

Methodology, Analysis & Collaborative Sensemaking

The influence of *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian* in this study extended beyond knowledge-sharing engagements (participant sessions) and into the processes of analysis, collaborative sensemaking, and beyond the thesis through dissemination. This meant that analysis was not approached as a detached technical exercise in coding and categorisation alone, nor as a process in which participants' narratives were extracted from their relational contexts and reorganised into abstract themes. Instead, the interpretive work remained attentive to the dialogic, contextual, and relational conditions under which they were gifted, expressed, negotiated, and clarified.

In practice, these methodologies informed how themes were identified and interpreted. I attended to emphasis, resonance, relational significance, contextual nuance, and the ways participants linked institutional concerns to wider histories, responsibilities, and aspirations. Meanings were therefore read not only through what was explicitly stated, but also through the relationships between ideas, the moral and political weight attached to particular issues, and the

collective textures that emerged across conversations. This supported an analytical process that was interpretive and relational.

These methodologies also shaped collaborative sensemaking across the case studies. Participants' narratives were engaged as contributions to an ongoing co-construction of understandings, or collaborative sensemaking. Analysis remained accountable to participants' own frames of meaning and to the relationships through which knowledge had been shared. The methodological emphasis on relational accountability required me to ask not only whether an interpretation was analytically persuasive, but also whether it was contextually grounded, ethically responsible, and respectful to the voice, intent, and *mana* of those whose knowledge informed the study.

Accordingly, *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian* informed theme development, interpretation, ethical accountability, and representation in interconnected ways. They shaped how I listened, how I analysed, how I returned to participants' meanings, and how I sought to share the thesis in ways that preserved complexity rather than reducing Indigenous and institutional knowledge to decontextualised findings. Their significance in this study is therefore methodological as well as procedural. They helped constitute the interpretive pathways through which the research findings were generated and understood.

Collaborative Sensemaking

I was committed to respecting the narratives of research collaborators and to honouring the Indigenous methods of dialogue used to share knowledge in this study. As previously mentioned, transcripts were provided to each participant to validate that their original contribution aligned with their intended meaning. I offered additional opportunities for research participants to validate and contribute to the summarised inferences, as well as to discuss them with my cultural guides to check interpretations of the dialogues and the knowledge shared. A document was created for each case study, organised by thematic areas that emerged as trends in the participants' *talanoa/tok stori/storian* sessions. A selection of anonymised narratives was included in the document to offer initial sensemaking contributions to the respective theme, followed by a few question prompts for further reflection and analysis. Participants were given several weeks to reflect and contribute to this document. Upon receiving participants' contributions to the specific case study collaborative sensemaking activity, I began an additional review and coding process. Once again, this process required great care to centre

participants' narratives and sensemaking in the analytical presentation, and to limit my objectivity and biases (Dyck et al., 2022; Johansson-Fua, 2020).

Across the five national universities within this thesis, cross-case synthesis was used in a descriptive and interpretive, rather than rank-order comparative sense. The purpose was not to generate a hierarchy, identify best performers, or reduce the institutions to a set of measurable variables. The synthesis aimed to trace areas of resonance, divergence, and contextual specificity across the cases in ways that remained faithful to their distinct institutional and national contexts. This approach draws on established case study and qualitative analysis scholarship that supports cross-case interpretive work, while remaining attentive to contextual integrity and analytical nuance. This includes Stake's (2006) emphasis on understanding the particularity of cases, Yin's (2018) discussion of multi-case design and analytical generalisation, and Miles et al.'s, (2018) treatment of cross-case patterning as a means of deepening, rather than flattening, qualitative understandings. Any cross-case insights generated in this thesis should be read as descriptive and theoretically informing, not claims of comparative equivalences or institutional rankings.

The following section elaborates on the critical policy analysis (CPA) that complements the narrative-based methods, focusing on the policy architectures that surround and shape the tertiary education landscapes in each case study location.

Critical Policy Analysis (CPA)

In addition to the knowledge shared through *talanoa/tok stori/storian* and subsequent collaborative sensemaking, this research employed critical policy analysis as a secondary analytical strand. This strand treated education policy not as a neutral, technical instrument, but as a space where power, values and knowledge hierarchies are negotiated and contested (Ball, 1993; Gale, 2001; Henry et al., 1997; Taylor, 1997). Critical policy analysis (CPA) aligns with the study's critical and Indigenous orientations, particularly the *motutapu* and *wansolwara* conceptual framings.

The CPA drew on tertiary education documents in each case study context. This included national development plans, education sector plans, tertiary education strategies, legislation, policy statements, institutional strategic plans, annual reports, web pages, statistical reports and selected donor and regional agency documents. These documents were analysed alongside the participants' narratives to support or challenge the perspectives from the *talanoa/tok*

stori/storian sessions, and to provide a more nuanced understanding of how national universities are positioned within national, regional and global policy architectures.

Methodologically, the CPA was structured through an adaptation of the Education Sector Analysis (ESA) framework developed by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2014a, 2014b, 2021). While ESA is typically applied to the education sector as a whole, this study mobilised it for an education subsector analysis (ESSA) focused specifically on PSET. In doing so, it retained the key elements of system performance, equity, efficiency and governance, but tailored them to the particularities of national universities in Moana Oceania. Additionally, the ESSA drew on UNESCO's Handbooks on Education Policy Analysis (UNESCO, 2013). These guiding frameworks shaped both the selection and analysis of documents and supported the alignment mapping for each country case study (see Tables 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15).

The 'critical' in CPA is not simply rhetorical, but explicitly draws attention to power, epistemic politics, and how policies can reproduce or unsettle colonial and neoliberal logics (Bacchi, 2009; Ball, 1994, 2005; Stein, 2018; Stein et al., 2019). Interrogating these dynamics was particularly important given the reliance of many Moana Oceania countries on development assistance to fund education strategies, and the central role of organisations such as UNESCO, the World Bank, UNICEF, the OECD and GPE in shaping policy templates and expectations (OECD, n.d.). The CPA approach revealed the tensions between development discourses, national sovereignty, and Indigenous futures, and how these are mediated in national universities.

A further layer of the CPA was informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013), drawing on Cohen et al. (2018) and related work on discourse and power in education. As Cohen et al. explain, critical discourse analysis "...reveals how power operates and is constituted, shaped, legitimated, maintained, regulated and challenged in and through language and discourses" (p.687), and "...interrogates ideological, political, social and economic power and how this is created, achieved, perpetuated and reproduced through discourses" (p.698). In this research, CDA was used as a CPA tool to read policy texts. Documents were examined not only for what they explicitly contained, but also for what Cohen et al. (2018) term "structured silences" (p. 688), or issues, groups or knowledges that are omitted, minimised or rendered invisible, and how these absences reflect broader differentials of power and influence. For example, attention was paid to the presence or absence of references to Indigenous languages and epistemologies, even when these were central within participants' narratives. This analytical approach, while secondary, focused on the broader aim of the thesis: to confront power and privilege in tertiary education policy and planning (Howarth, 2009), and to examine

whether they are locally conceptualised or borrowed from external templates. It also resonated with the Moana-centred concepts of *motutapu* and *wansolwara*, which foreground relationships, mobilities and knowledges in understanding policy (Jessop, 2009). As noted earlier, the coding of *talanoa/tok stori/storian* and collaborative sensemaking transcripts drew on the concepts of *motutapu*, *wansolwara*, and critical policy analysis, and the codes were organised around the three scales of national, regional, and international influence. Insights from the CPA informed cross-case themes, such as national priorities, regionalism, and internationalisation, which are elaborated in the case study chapters and synthesised in Chapter 9. CPA offered a structured and critical way of understanding how Indigenous, national, regional, and global priorities interface with the policies and planning of national universities, and how these shape the obstacles and possibilities for leadership, sovereignty, and Indigenous knowledge in Moana Oceania tertiary education.

Research Ethics

Research ethics were positioned as relational, contextual, and ongoing rather than merely a procedural requirement. The study was guided by principles such as respect, reciprocity, care and relational accountability, shaped by Moana Oceania values of relationality, service and responsibility, and in compliance with all institutional guidelines (Anae, 2016, 2019). The conceptual lenses of *motutapu* and *wansolwara* (Johansson-Fua, 2020, 2022) oriented the research towards the relational sacredness of knowledge gifted and the currents that connect people, places, and institutions. This ethical practice meant being mindful of power, privilege and positionalities; of the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism; and of centring Indigenous knowledges and approaches to research design, data collection, interpretation, analysis and dissemination.

The study complied with the University of Waikato's ethical requirements and received approval from the Division of Education Ethics' Committee (Reference: FEDU022/23, Approved: 13 July 2023). Where required, additional permissions were sought from relevant ministries, national universities, and other agencies in participating countries, as detailed in Appendix B. A total of 14 ethics applications were submitted and approved across the research journey. These processes included submitting information about the research aims, the proposed methods, recruitment strategies, data management and potential risks to participants. A subsequent change in my employment required notification to the University of Waikato's Division of Education Ethics Committee (08 July 2024) for review and approval, to ensure any

concerns regarding a conflict of interest were addressed. Formal approvals provided essential permissions, but ethical practice extended beyond institutional compliance to ongoing negotiation and validation with participants.

Conducting research in Moana Oceania, and particularly with Indigenous leaders, required careful attention to local protocols, histories and relationships. The study was informed by place-based and culturally responsive research principles that emphasise relational accountability, collective benefit, and respect for local authority and knowledge (Berryman et al., 2013). Guidance was sought from local colleagues, elders and experienced researchers in each context to ensure that the approach to *talanoa/tok stori/storian* and collaborative sensemaking was culturally appropriate, including for how invitations were extended, how participant sessions were opened and closed, and how hospitality and care were enacted. The research design recognised that participants were not simply ‘informants’, but knowledge holders and leaders whose time, experience and insights carried responsibilities for me as the researcher. This translated into efforts to minimise extractive practices, to honour local epistemologies and ontologies, and to situate the analysis within the historical and contemporary contexts of Moana Oceania tertiary education (Du Plessis & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2009; Grenier, 1998).

Free, prior and informed consent was treated as an ongoing relational process rather than an administrative step. Prospective participants received details outlining the purpose of the study, the research activities (*talanoa/tok stori/storian*, collaborative sensemaking and follow-up communications), anticipated time commitments, potential risks and benefits, and their right to decline to answer particular questions, to pause or stop participation, or withdraw their contributions within an agreed timeframe. Written consent was obtained before participation in the *talanoa/tok stori/storian* sessions. During the sessions, consent was revisited informally and verbally, with participants reminded of their choices and invited to reconsider how they may want to participate. Where quotations were used in the case study chapters, they were from participants who had consented to audio recording and were made aware that their words might be cited in an anonymised form in the research dissemination products.

Protecting confidentiality and anonymity were key ethical concerns. Participants are identified in their narrative contributions simply by a number and an indication of whether they worked for the university or the government. All other identifying details were removed or altered in the presentation of findings. This is particularly important in the small systems of Moana Oceania. The professional risks associated with speaking critically about governments, donors or regional bodies were mitigated by stringent confidentiality practices and by avoiding

attribution. The study acknowledges that in tightly interconnected tertiary education systems in Moana Oceania, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Participants were therefore informed about these limits.

A data management plan was designed to safeguard participants' identities and contributions further. Audio recordings, transcripts, and associated materials were stored on password-protected, secure servers, with the consent forms and participant details stored separately. Access to raw data was restricted to the researcher and the PhD supervisory team. Data will be retained and disposed of in line with the University of Waikato's policy and any additional conditions specified by ethics approvals.

Ethical considerations were woven through each of the methodological strands and analytical tools used. During *talanoa/tok stori/storian*, ethical practice involved creating space for open, relational conversations, being attentive to participants' cues and comfort, and honouring the stories and silences that emerged. During collaborative sensemaking, efforts were made to encourage engagement by offering written or virtual meeting options so participants could choose the approach that was most comfortable and convenient for them. CPA, while drawing primarily on publicly available policy texts, nevertheless raised ethical questions about representation and critique, particularly in small systems that are frequently subject to external scrutiny. The analysis situated policies within wider histories and structures, and within national systems and regional bodies in ways that were critical yet respectful, recognising the complex constraints under which many operate.

Finally, reciprocity and research dissemination are treated as ethical responsibilities rather than extras (Kirkpatrick, 2009; Trainor & Bouchard, 2012). I am committed to ensuring that the benefits of the research not only support my degree requirements but also return to the communities, institutions, and systems from which the knowledge emerged. Therefore, an atypical thesis chapter outlining a dissemination plan (Chapter 11) has been included to elevate transparency and accountability.

Reflexivity

Ethical research also requires ongoing reflexive engagement with the researcher's own positionality and the power relations inherent in cross-national and cross-cultural research. This thesis journey was shaped by the researcher's location within particular institutional, cultural, and professional contexts, as well as by existing and emerging relationships. This influenced my access to participants, the knowledge shared, and the interpretations made. Reflexive

strategies, including journaling, regular discussions with supervisors and peers, and revisiting interpretations in light of participants' sensemaking, were used to consider how assumptions, privileges and institutional affiliations might be impacting the research process. This reflexive work was integral to the critical and Indigenous orientations of this research and to broader efforts to resist extractive and deficit-based research practices (Finlay, 2002; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020).

This research journey was a constant exercise in interrogating what I already knew, what I still needed to learn, and what I needed to know. Through constant reflexivity, the intersections and interactions between my values and those of the research participants became clearer, serving as a guide to building and nurturing relationality and facilitating reciprocal knowledge sharing (Finlay, 2002; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). My experiences and prior knowledge, particularly in less familiar contexts, were not solely a challenge to negotiate but also provided opportunities and support in offering a 'global' context to the research discussions. I was committed to becoming a "credible outsider" (Porisky, 2023, p. 51), honouring and caring for the ways of being and knowing through which Indigenous peoples of the Moana Oceania represented their narratives.

As a researcher not from the cultures in which this research engaged, it was of utmost importance that I be mindful of "any inherent power imbalances" while working to maintain "authenticity in the stories of participants" (Flavell & Cunningham, 2023, p. 1). To do this, I employed active reflexivity throughout each phase of the research process. Active reflexivity, as discussed by Soedirgo and Glas (2020), is realised "by adopting a disposition toward both ongoing reflection about our own social location and ongoing reflection on our assumptions regarding others' perceptions" (p.1). Therefore, I have incorporated the four strategies of reflexivity proposed by Soedirgo and Glas (2020): "recording assumptions around positionality, routinized and systemizing reflexivity, bringing other actors into the process, and 'showing our work' in the publication process" (p.1). This process strengthened the ethical integrity of the research phases and minimised cultural insensitivities and other risks. I maintained a research journal to reflect on my assumptions, observations and interactions as a practice of active reflexivity to elevate the authenticity of participants' narratives. It is through these reflections that I confronted how to "address the bias of power in relationships with participants" (Flavell & Cunningham, 2023, p.5).

With over two decades of professional experience in higher education, I cannot claim to be unbiased or objective. Therefore, it is essential to clearly articulate, within the textual, analytical, and relational components of this research, my positionalities and my aspirations to

approach each aspect of the study through diligent reflexivity. I strive to understand my own process of constructing this research, as well as any subjectivity and power enacted in the inclusion or exclusion of sensemaking with research collaborators and their positions within the research. Reflexivity throughout all phases of this research has been paramount to navigate the relational and analytical components. It was necessary to constantly confront and negotiate my positionalities and all explicit and implicit characteristics of my identity. A critical ethnographic methodology demands it, and ethically, it is an imperative, particularly when conducting research with Indigenous peoples as a non-Indigenous person (Azmat & Masta, 2021). Reflexivity in this study was more than an individual exercise in self-awareness, but part of a broader decolonial journey and relational obligation to question how power, privilege, interpretation, and representation operated through the research process.

Research Limitations and Challenges

As with all research, there are limitations and challenges to be expected. To further strengthen the transparency of this research journey, I present some of the limitations I anticipated before fieldwork. A more detailed section on the limitations actually experienced can be found in Chapter 9: Discussion (Findings).

A first limitation concerns the participants. Participant selection focused on the policy, leadership and institutional actors responsible for shaping national university priorities and regional and global engagements in the PSET sector. This design decision aligns with understanding the governance and policy architectures influencing strategic planning and leadership in higher education.

A second limitation relates to the availability and quality of PSET data across the five case studies. Official enrolment and completion figures, for example, were incomplete and therefore limited robust, quantitative analysis. This constraint, however, also elevates a substantive finding, that the national and regional planning of PSET often proceeds in contexts of incomplete, inconsistent or contested data.

Resource constraints also shaped the research design, predominantly the fieldwork and dissemination components. Financial limitations limited the duration of visits and the in-person engagement across all five case studies. Similarly, the three-year doctoral timeframe imposed time constraints, requiring careful planning and prioritisation of data collection and analysis activities. These combined constraints limited some breadth to the research, including any extended longitudinal engagement.

Language may have presented a further limitation. The research was conducted in English across multilingual settings. This introduced the possibility that some meanings, particularly those embedded in Indigenous concepts, could not be fully captured within the research analysis and dissemination.

Policy environments in Moana Oceania are highly fluid, with reforms, leadership changes, shifting regional priorities, and geopolitics. This research study, therefore, only captures these contexts at specific moments rather than through a longitudinal lens.

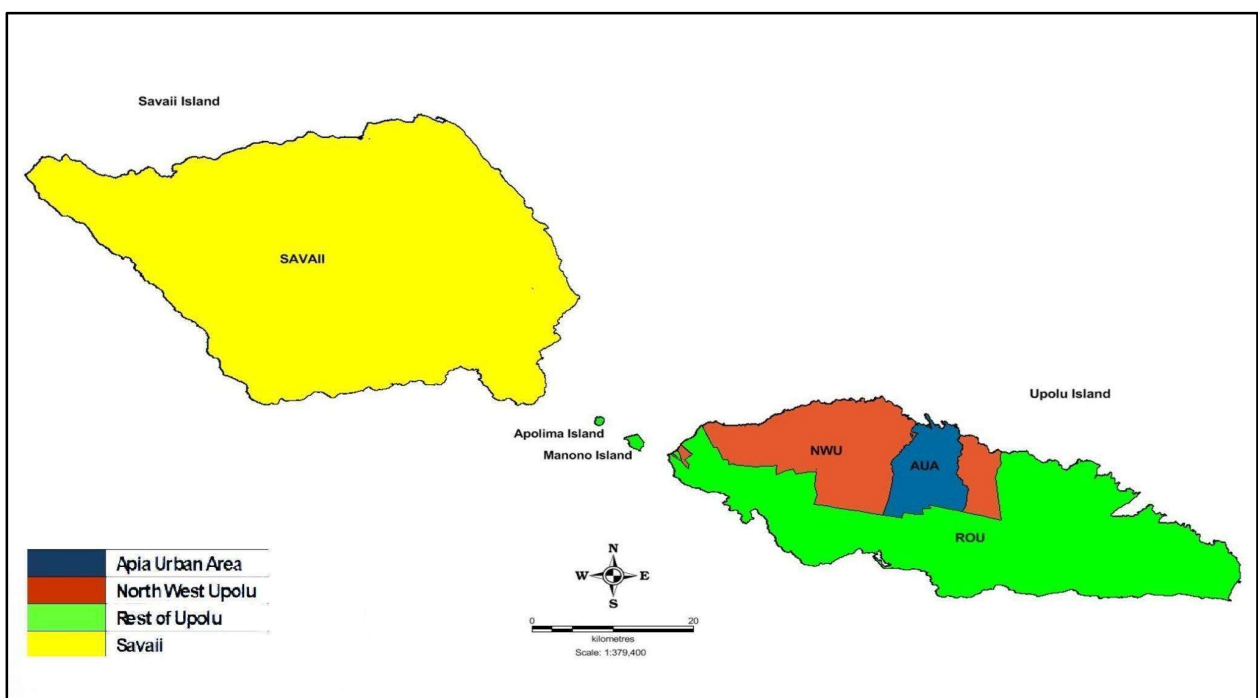
The limitations discussed do not diminish the study's contributions. However, they must be acknowledged as they shape the boundaries of the findings. They highlight the findings as contextually situated, qualitatively rich and institutionally focused, rather than exhaustive or representative of all stakeholders and experiences within the five national universities and contexts included.

Chapter 4. Case Study: Samoa

This chapter examines the research inquiry through the contextual lenses of Samoa. As the first Moana Oceana nation to establish a national university and the first to attain national independence, Samoa presents a particularly distinct lens for this investigation. The chapter first outlines the multiple socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts that have shaped the development of Samoa's education system. It then engages in a critical review and presentation of national, regional, and international education policies, their implementation and impact. This is followed by an exploration of key findings from participants' narratives and enriched through collaborative sensemaking. The chapter concludes by discussing the broader implications of the case study, highlighting the challenges, opportunities, and directions for future research. All subsequent case study chapters will follow similar content and structure.

Figure 02.

Map of the Four Statistical Regions of Samoa



Source: Adapted from SBS, 2016.

The Contexts

Samoa's small population, geographic isolation, limited economic diversification, and high labour mobility pose unique challenges for sustainable development and educational planning (Coxon & Munce, 2008; Spratt, 2012). The intersection of traditional chiefly systems (*fa'amatai*) and formal governance structures continues to influence institutional behaviour and community engagement within the education sector (Amosa, 2012; Ioane & Tudor, 2017; Tuia, 2019; Tuia & Iyer, 2015). This context section also focuses on the development of Samoa's higher education system, highlighting efforts to balance national priorities and cultural imperatives with the demands and influences of regional and international frameworks (Coxon et al., 2002; Crossley & Watson, 2003).

Demographic Contexts

According to the 2021 Samoa Population & Housing Census (SBS, 2022a), the total population was 205,557, with a near-equal percentage of men and women, and a youthful population comprising more than 50%. It is essential to highlight the young median age (22 years old) in this case study, as it has a direct impact on the education system (SBS, 2022a). The population is relatively evenly distributed across Samoa's four statistical regions (see the map in Figure 02). Between 2016 and 2021, population trends revealed a move away from the Apia urban centre with increases in all three other districts - Northwest Upolu, Rest of Upolu and Savaii (SBS, 2016, 2022a). This is a significant trend to highlight to strengthen educational equity and expand access outside of the urban centre. Religion is deeply integrated into the culture and contexts of Samoa, with approximately 90% of the population actively attending church from one of the six Christian denominations. Samoan culture also includes the sacred system of *fa'amatai* leadership. Those who hold *matai* (chief) titles are bestowed with greater responsibility for the well-being of their extended family and communities. This system is deeply integrated into the modern nation, where the value of service extends into the public domain, including governance and leadership. For example, all Samoan members of the Legislative Assembly are *matai*, and before universal suffrage in 1991, only *matai* could vote. The *fa'amatai* is an intricate system, of which this brief description is inadequate. In recognition of the population demographics presented, Samoa's educational system needs to balance and address these current realities and future trends. This requires complex, forward-thinking planning and policymaking, grounded in respect and commitment to *fa'a Samoa* (Amosa, 2012; Anae, 2016; GoS, 1960; Huffer & So'o, 2000, 2005; Ioane & Tudor, 2017).

Socio-Economic Contexts

Samoa was designated by the World Bank (WB, 2025h), utilising the Atlas method²⁸, as an Upper Middle-Income Country (UMIC)²⁹ in 2016, but, as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, it was downgraded in 2020 to a Lower Middle-Income Country (LMIC)³⁰. The country demonstrated significant economic resilience and exited its recession, and in 2024 returned to the UMIC designation. While this economic classification is argued to “reflect a country’s level of development” (Metreau et al., 2024), it does not adequately account for Samoa's realities. For example, this higher classification (UMIC) indicates that Samoa is assessed at a higher poverty line, thereby the relative poverty indicators show a higher percentage of the population living in poverty, along with the associated sector-specific indicators (e.g., health, education, etc.). During the April 2024 - March 2025 financial year, the GDP increased by 10.2% from the previous year, reaching SAT 3,502.05 million (USD 3,502.05 million). Remittances remain a significant contributor to Samoa’s national economy (25.6% of total GDP in the 24/25 fiscal year) and support Samoan households, with 90% of households reporting receiving remittances (SBS, 2024). In March 2025, the annual total value of remittances was over 897.07 million SAT (\$319.10 million USD) between April 2024 and March 2025, a 5.2% increase from the previous year and indicative of the enduring sense of responsibility among Samoans residing or working abroad to provide financial assistance to their families and kin in Samoa (MOF, 2025b).

According to the 2024 Household Income and Expenditure Survey Report (SBS, 2024), the average annual household income was SAT 2,030.5 million (\$62,456 USD), with a per capita average across the population of SAT 315,583 (\$9,707 USD) (SBS, 2024). Employment in Samoa includes individuals aged 10 years and over engaged in formal, informal or subsistence work. In 2021, the unemployment rate reached 11.9% (6,530 people), with notable regional and gender disparities (SBS, 2022b). There remains substantially higher unemployment (19.3% in 2024) among youth (ages 15-24) than in the overall population (6.5% in 2024), with females experiencing more than twice the unemployment rate as males in both the youth and adult age ranges (WB, 2025b, 2025c).

²⁸ Atlas Method: “The World Bank's official estimates of the size of economies and country classifications by income level are based on Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. For cross-national comparisons, estimates are converted from local currency units (LCU) to current U.S. dollars using the Atlas method, referring to a former World Bank publication called the Atlas of Global Development” (WB, 2025j).

²⁹ For the 2026 fiscal year, upper middle-income economies (UMIC) are those with a GNI per capita between \$4,496USD and \$13,935USD. (WB, 2025h)

³⁰ For the 2026 fiscal year, lower middle-income economies (LMIC) are those with a GNI per capita between \$1,136USD and \$4,495USD. (WB, 2025h)

Environmental Contexts

Samoa faces vulnerability to environmental hazards, including cyclones, flooding, and drought. These climatic threats have significant implications for the education system, particularly through the destruction of school infrastructure, disruptions to academic learning, and student displacement. Such interruptions contribute to heightened absenteeism and deepen disparities in educational outcomes over the long term. The absence of a robust and inclusive social protection framework limits the government's capacity to mitigate these effects. The government has integrated disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation within the education sector, aligned to the principles of the Comprehensive School Safety Framework and Activity 4.2.1 of Samoa's Education Sector Plan (ESP) 2019-2024 (MEC, 2019a, p.50) which emphasised building resilience to natural disasters and climate change across primary, secondary, and post-school education and training (PSET) institutions. This initiative fosters inter-agency collaboration, primarily between the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), the Samoa Qualifications Authority (SQA), and international development partners, to enhance preparedness and planning, enforcing Minimum Service Standards for physical safety and student well-being, and supporting curricular initiatives to raise awareness of climate change and its implications (MEC, 2019a).

Political-Institutional Contexts

To understand the development of higher education in Samoa, it is essential to situate it within the broader political and institutional histories. Samoa's governance and institutional frameworks are shaped by layers of histories, Indigenous governance, colonial legacies and post-independence political systems (Meleisea & Schoeffel, 2017). At the core of Samoan society is the *fa'amatai* system, an Indigenous chiefly governance structure that continues to inform political and social organisation. The *fa'amatai* is centred on the *matai* (chiefly) title system, which designates authority and responsibility within extended family units (*'āiga*) and village councils (*fono*) (Huffer & So'o, 2005). This system has served as a form of decentralised governance and local decision-making through consensus and collective responsibility (Macpherson, 2005). The interlinked, highly complex network of chiefs and extended family networks forms the structure of social organisation in Samoa, with *matai* holding authority over land, *matai* titles, and land resources. 80% of land in Samoa is under customary jurisdiction, which means *matai* decide how land should be used and allocated. The *fa'amatai* system persists alongside political institutions, influencing national leadership and local governance

(GoS, 1960; So'o, 2008), shaping social norms, including attitudes toward authority, education and gender roles, factors which intersect meaningfully with participation in higher education. Schools in rural areas navigate complex relationships between school governance and village communities due to Samoa's social organisation.

Christian missionaries arrived in the early 19th century and embedded Christianity into Samoan society. Churches became not only centres of spiritual life, but also of education, introducing literacy and formal schooling (Meleisea & Meleisea, 1987). Missionary institutions laid the foundation for early educational infrastructure, with curricula grounded in Christian values and Western pedagogies. This religious legacy continues to play a central role in Samoan education, where faith-based education providers are present at all educational levels (Meleisea & Meleisea, 1987). Samoa's first experience with a colonial administration began under German rule in 1900.

The German colonial government focused primarily on economic development, particularly in agriculture and plantations, rather than building broad social infrastructure (Field, 1984). While the *fa'amatai* system was maintained mainly, it was co-opted to serve colonial administrative goals. Although the Germans did not significantly invest in formal education for Samoans, they laid the groundwork for state control that would expand under subsequent colonial powers (Meleisea, 1987). The period also marked the beginning of structural changes in the national organisation, with long-term implications for resource allocation and social stratification, factors that directly influenced access to education (Hiery, 2001). After World War I, New Zealand acquired control of Samoa. The New Zealand administration had a more direct impact on social services, including education, although policies were often paternalistic and racially hierarchical (Davidson, 1967). Western-style education was expanded, yet access remained limited and was usually segregated (Huffer & So'o, 2000). The period was marked by the rise of Samoan resistance movements that challenged colonial rule and sought national self-determination (Field, 1984). New Zealand's governance also introduced elements of Westminster-style parliamentary institutions, eventually developing into Samoa's contemporary political system (So'o, 2008).

Samoa became independent in 1962, becoming the first Moana Oceania nation to do so. Its independent constitution was crafted through negotiation between Samoan leaders and New Zealand officials and reflects a hybrid model of governance. The constitution recognises the centrality of the *fa'amatai* system while also establishing a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy (GoS, 1960). At the time of independence, only *matai* were eligible to vote or stand

for parliament, reflecting the influence of traditional governance in formal political processes (Davidson, 1967). Although universal suffrage was not introduced until 1990, the requirement that Parliamentary candidates hold a *matai* title remains today, embedding Indigenous governance within democratic institutions (So'o, 2008). Today, Samoa operates as a parliamentary democracy with a single-house legislature, guided by a constitution that enshrines human rights while accommodating Indigenous governance structures (Meleisea & Meleisea, 1987). The presence of the *fa'amatai* system within political mechanisms underscores Samoa's unique model of governance, one that simultaneously honours traditions and embraces a colonially imported structure (Macpherson, 2005). This political-institutional context profoundly shapes Samoa's higher education landscape. Policy formulation, institutional autonomy, and educational equity are all situated within this duality of customary and state governance. Understanding how these intersecting systems operate is essential to critically examining the ways higher education is accessed, governed, and experienced in contemporary Samoa.

Education Sector Contexts

Samoa has been recognised for its strong commitment to education and literacy, with an overall literacy rate of 99% for adults aged 15 and over in 2021, far exceeding the global average of 87% in 2022 (WB, 2024a). However, there are still discrepancies, particularly between urban and rural areas and among residents under 15 years of age. The primary factor contributing to this discrepancy among youth is school attendance. In a representative sample of the population, 94% attended an educational institution, with the highest level of achievement at 7% in early childhood education, 31% in primary education, 3% in TVET, and 15% in higher education. Secondary education has the highest attainment level at 48% of the total population. According to 2021 census data, 25% of the school-age population in Apia-Urban attended higher education, compared to 12.7% combined for the rest of the country (SBS, 2022a). Across demographic groups, those residing in the urban centre of Apia have nearly twice the higher education attendance rate as those in rural Savai'i (SBS, 2024).

Governance, policy setting, planning, financing, and quality assurance are organised in Samoa through both centralised and decentralised structures. At a community level, the Women's Committee is generally responsible for providing guidance and leadership in education matters, and the Church's *a'oga faife'au* (pastor's school) has historically supported the development of literacy competencies (Amosa, 2012). The influence of both the *fa'amatai* and religious

institutions, therefore, must be integrated into the education sector's planning if initiatives are to be successful. Since the 2019 Education Amendment Act (MEC, 2019b), all residents aged 4 to 16 are required by law to attend school. This accounts for approximately 35% of Samoa's total population (MEC, 2022b).

Education governance in Samoa is shared among three central bodies: the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), the Samoa Qualifications Authority (SQA), and the National University of Samoa (NUS). Each of these bodies has distinct and overlapping roles. The MEC holds policy and regulatory authority over ECE, primary and secondary education, while SQA oversees policy and regulation for PSET. PSET delivery and financing are managed by a network of government, church, private and donor partners, who are not always included in sector-wide decision-making processes. The MEC operates within a robust legal and policy framework, including the Education Act 2009, Teachers Act 2016, and broader governmental directives such as the Public Services Act 2004 and the Pathway for the Development of Samoa (PDS) (MOF, 2021b), which guides its functions and ensures alignment with national goals. This multi-actor, multi-level structure demands strong coordination and resource management to achieve accountable and effective education governance (MEC, 2021b).

Since Samoa's first Education Sector Plan (ESP) in 2013 (MEC, 2013), a sector-wide approach to education planning has been part of broader public sector reforms (MEC, 2022a; UNESCO, 2007). The 2019-2024 ESP outlined five strategic goals, focused on quality, access, relevance, planning and sustainability, each paired with targeted outcomes to improve learning, participation, employment, data-informed decision-making, and resource management across the sector (MEC, 2019a). In 2022, MEC commissioned a review of education sector governance, which revealed ongoing challenges in policy coordination, primarily due to a lack of a unified, clearly defined understanding of the education sector's scope and boundaries (MEC, 2022a). While MEC is responsible for policy development in ECE, primary and secondary education, the SQA holds legislative authority over PSET. This division has led to instances of policy duplication, such as separate frameworks for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) development by both MEC and NUS, underscoring the lack of a functioning sector-wide approach (MEC, 2023a). In 2023, an agreement between MEC, NUS, SQA, and relevant stakeholders aimed to provide "...seamless, relevant and supported pathways based on strong early learning foundations" (MEC, 2023b, p. 1). The agreement, titled *Sootaga Mautu Fa'aleaoaoga*, centred *fa'a Samoa* in the design and implementation of interventions, namely in student-centred approaches and community collaborations (MEC, 2023b). Recent

efforts to develop overarching frameworks for more coherent policymaking have yet to translate into measurable improvements. A call for urgent action to address governance weaknesses for inclusion in the 2025-2030 Education Sector Plan, including a shared definition of the sector that reflects human development and to create sector-wide policy processes, particularly through mechanisms such as the Education Sector Advisory Committee (ESAC), for more integrated and accountable governance.

Samoa's consistent investment in education reflects its prioritisation of the sector as a key driver of national development. Since 2019, education has received the second-largest share of the national budget annually³¹. Between 2016/17 and 2020/21, education spending ranged from 13% to 15% of total government expenditures, and 4% to 6% of GDP, respectively, with overall education funding increasing by 45% over the decade (MOF, 2020, 2021a, 2022, 2023, 2024). Education financing is sourced from government allocations, development aid, and private contributions from households and organisations. However, public financial reports lack disaggregated data, making it challenging to track education spending. Nonetheless, the emphasis on quality education, as outlined in Key Priority Area 3 of the Pathway for the Development of Samoa 2019-2025, signals its central role in advancing the national vision of "social harmony, safety and freedom for all" (MOF, 2021b, p.6).

Access, equity, and inclusion remain central priorities in Samoa's education sector and in foreign financing initiatives, with notable progress and persistent disparities. Gender parity in total school enrolment is broadly achieved, with males and females each comprising approximately 50% of students across all education levels. Interestingly, fewer males continue into higher education; those who do are more likely to reach graduate and postgraduate levels, indicating gendered differences in educational trajectories (SQA, 2022). Geographic and disability-related inequalities further complicate the landscape of educational access in Samoa. Rural areas experience lower attendance and literacy rates, particularly among males, many of whom enter the workforce earlier, contributing to the underrepresentation of boys in later schooling stages (MEC, 2019a; SBS, 2020).

³¹ Except in 2020/21 fiscal year when the COVID-19 pandemic demanded previously unallocated resources.

Post-School Education & Training (PSET) in Samoa

Development of PSET in Samoa

The development of the PSET sector in Samoa has evolved through several critical phases (see Figure 03 below), reflecting national priorities, regional influences and global expectations.

Early Foundations (1844 - 1961)

PSET in Samoa began with religious and colonial-era institutions. The Malua Theological College was founded in 1844, setting an early precedent. This was followed by the establishment of the Primary Teachers College in 1939 to develop capacity and skills for Samoans to become teachers. The introduction of a Tertiary Scholarship Scheme in 1947, funded by the New Zealand government, focused on Samoans seeking qualifications in either Fiji or New Zealand, primarily in the health sciences. The 1960s saw regional collaboration with the creation of the South Pacific Regional College of Tropical Agriculture (Amosa, 2012).

Post-Independence Growth (1962 - 1983)

After Samoa gained independence in 1962, education became a focus for national development. Samoa's second National Development Plan (1970 - 1975) highlighted the urgent need to develop local skills and expertise, particularly in the health and education sectors, in response to the limited availability of PSET within the country and the scarcity of scholarships for overseas study (Amosa, 2012). This need was amplified by the increasing migration of skilled labour and the absence of training opportunities for locally based professionals, leaving Samoa reliant on external labour to meet domestic workforce demands (GoS, 1970). The plan underscored the importance of establishing a sustainable, nationally driven system for building human capital to support long-term social and economic development (Amosa, 2012). The National Nursing School was established in 1973, and the University of the South Pacific opened a campus in Alafua in 1977. The Teachers College expanded in 1978 to include secondary teacher training, and the *Iunivesite o Samoa* (University of Samoa) was established. In 1980, the Western Samoa Marine Training Centre was created to support vocational training (Amosa, 2012).

Institutional Consolidation (1984 - 1993)

Between the 1970s and 1990s, efforts were undertaken to strengthen Samoa's education system through the development of a national curriculum, the expansion of technical and vocational education and the enhancement of teacher training programmes (Amosa, 2012). The National University of Samoa (NUS) was founded in 1984. By 1993, the Samoa Polytechnic was formed through merging the Western Samoa Technical Institute and the Marine Training Centre, and the National Nursing School was integrated into NUS. In the early 1990s, the Samoan government established its own national scholarship scheme to expand access to higher education, moving beyond the earlier arrangement, which relied heavily on Australian (DFAT) and Aotearoa New Zealand (MFAT)-funded scholarships tied to institutions such as the University of the South Pacific and universities in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (Amosa, 2012).

Policy and Quality Assurance Development (1994 - 2010)

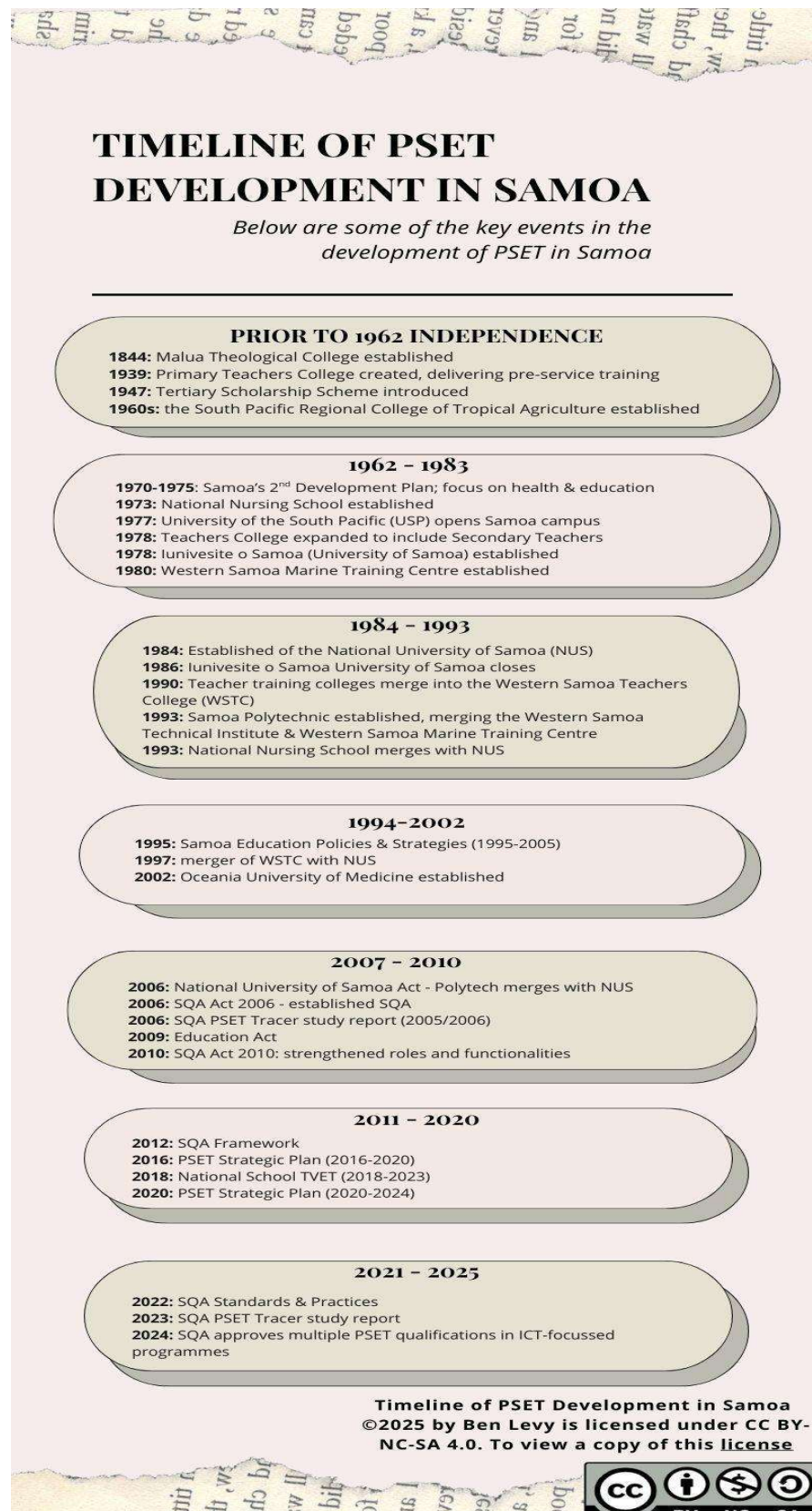
The introduction of strategic planning and regulatory frameworks marked this era. The Samoa Education Policies and Strategies (1995-2000) provided direction, and the merger of the Teachers College with NUS occurred in 1997. The Oceania University of Medicine was established in 2002. In 2006, the Samoa Qualifications Authority (SQA) was established, alongside a major institutional merger in which Samoa Polytechnic joined NUS. The Education Act (2009) and a revised SQA Act (2010) further reinforced sector governance (MEC, 2009; SQA, 2010).

Strategic Expansion and Reforms (2011 - 2025)

Between 2011 and 2025, the focus shifted to strategic planning, quality assurance, and programme diversification. Key initiatives included the SQA Framework (2012), two successive PSET Strategic Plans (2016-2020, 2020-2024), and the National School TVET programme (2018-2023). SQA standards and practices were further actualised with the approval of multiple ICT-focused qualifications in 2024, reflecting evolving workforce demands.

Figure 03.

PSET Development Timeline for Samoa



Overview of PSET in Samoa

PSET in Samoa is defined as “all learning that occurs outside the formal early childhood, primary, and secondary education levels...[and] includes tertiary-level education at universities, pre-service and in-service professional education, technical and vocational education, theological and religious instruction, apprenticeships, non-formal education, and on-the-job training” (SQA, 2023a, p.3). The delivery of PSET programmes is carried out by the National University of Samoa (NUS) and various faith-based and private HEIs. According to the 2023 SQA Report (SQA, 2023a), there were 24 registered, formal PSET providers, divided into three categories, as follows:

- Universities (3)
 - National University of Samoa
 - Oceania University of Medicine - Samoa
 - University of the South Pacific - Samoa Campus
- Religious Providers (9)
 - Assembly of God of Samoa Theological College
 - Malua Bible School
 - Moamoa Theological College
 - Piula Theological College
 - RHEMA Bible Training Centre - South Pacific
 - South Pacific Nazarene Theological College
 - Youth With a Mission
 - Worldwide Mission Training Centre
- TVET Providers (12)
 - Australia Pacific Training Coalition
 - Congregational Christian Church of Samoa (CCCS) School of Fine Arts and Museum
 - Congregational Christian Church of Samoa Vocational School
 - Don Bosco College of Vocational Technical Centre
 - Don Bosco Technical Centre
 - Early Childhood Education Teachers Training Institute

- Methodist Technical and Creative Centre - Laumua o Punaoa Technical Centre
- Pesega Technical and Vocational Education and Training Institute
- Samoa Business Hub
- Tesese Institute
- Uesiliana Vocational Centre
- Vaiola Technical and Vocational Education and Training Institute

In addition to those above, there were an additional 40 that are referred to as ‘non-formal education providers’ listed in the same report, categorised as either government or non-governmental providers (SQA, 2023a). A total of 230 qualification programmes spanning certificate, diploma, bachelor's, and postgraduate levels, of which SQA accredits 131, were also documented (SQA, 2022). According to the PSET Statistical Bulletin 2022, approximately 70% of PSET enrolments were at universities, 22% at TVET providers, and 8% at theological institutions (SQA, 2022).

The governance of Samoa’s PSET is primarily exercised by the Samoa Qualifications Authority (SQA), established under the Samoa Qualifications Act 2010 (SQA, 2010). SQA is mandated to regulate, quality-assure, coordinate and monitor PSET providers; register qualifications; accredit providers and programmes; and offer policy advice to the Government to ensure alignment with national socio-economic goals. Through its strategic planning and statutory functions, SQA leads this mandate in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Culture and the National University of Samoa (SQA, 2021).

Financing PSET in Samoa remains a critical dimension of national human capital development, intertwined with multiple layers of system planning, sector coordination, and international development assistance. PSET is funded through a mix of government budget allocations, donor assistance, scholarships and stipends, small grants, and limited private contributions. The Samoan Government supported equity and access through the PSET Access Grant, initially funded by the TVET Support Programme, which subsidised underserved and non-traditional learners (MEC, 2013). Scholarships and stipends, while available through government and donor schemes, remain limited and primarily target high achievers, with little alignment to areas of workforce need, thereby limiting their potential impact (Wright, 2017).

Samoa has instituted two main policy instruments to guide and govern PSET, namely the Samoa Qualifications Authority Act (2010) and the National University of Samoa Act (2016) (GoS,

2006; SQA, 2010). The National University of Samoa, in addition to its primary function as the national university, also serves as an implementing partner for sector-wide policy interventions and strategies. In addition to SQA's mandate to develop policy and governance mechanisms, they are also tasked with strengthening and diversifying PSET to better align with national development and labour priorities (SQA, 2010). SQA developed the Samoa Qualifications Framework, designed to increase recognition and mobility of qualifications earned in Samoa beyond its borders. Creating a clear system of provider registration and accreditation was an essential first step in this work.

In 2018, MEC launched an ambitious 10-year framework to improve teacher development and related policies, the National Teacher Development Framework (NTDF) (MEC, 2018a). Within this framework, the National University of Samoa is well-positioned to support upskilling programmes for current teachers and continuous professional development programmes in key priority areas. Teachers in Samoa are required to complete both pre-service and in-service education as part of their ongoing national registration. Although MEC coordinates these requirements, the education is delivered by the National University of Samoa. The creation of Samoa's Inclusive Education Country profile was the result of a nationwide review of inclusivity in education. Key findings revealed limited teacher preparation in inclusive education, primarily due to limited in-service training opportunities (MEC, 2023d).

NUS has also leveraged Online Distance Flexible Blended Learning (ODFBL) to expand access to its academic programmes (MEC, 2023c). In 2024, the SQA introduced a comprehensive suite of nationally accredited Information and Communication Technology (ICT) qualifications, ranging from Level I to Level IV. These qualifications were designed to enhance workforce competencies in Samoa's growing ICT sector (SQA, 2024). In January 2025, NUS launched its Information Communication Technology Strategy 2024-2028, to "leverage technology to enhance education, research, and administrative efficiency, aligning with the broader NUS Strategy 2030" (NUS, 2025, p.2).

As of 2022, the PSET system has registered 447 lecturers and trainers, comprising 38% female and 62% male, a gender split that is the opposite in primary and secondary schooling. These registered educators were distributed quite distinctively across the three higher education provider types: 47% in universities (48% female, 52% male), 32% in TVET (38% female, 62% male), and 21% in religious/theological institutions (16% female, 84% male). Regarding educators' qualifications, 39% held postgraduate qualifications, 28% earned bachelor's degrees,

and the remaining held lower-level or certificate qualifications. The largest group of educators taught within the broad disciplinary area of Society and Culture (SQA, 2022).

PSET enrolments in Samoa have shown steady growth from 2019 to 2022, reflecting both demographic shifts and the expanding recognition of PSET as a critical pathway for skills development and employment. Although the number of registered PSET providers remained constant during this period, total enrolments rose by approximately 37%, signalling a growing demand for qualifications (MEC, 2022b; SQA, 2022). In 2022, enrolment in PSET programmes reached 6,678 students, with females accounting for 58% and males 42%, continuing a gendered trend that mirrors higher female completion and transition rates from secondary education, especially in Years 12 and 13. Another critical statistic revealed in 2022 indicated a 7.2% dropout rate in PSET, with 97% of these occurring within TVET institutions, indicating that an intervention is required (SQA, 2022). Notably, enrolments at the university level nearly doubled for both male and female students between 2019 and 2022, with particularly sharp increases among females in secondary-level pathways into PSET (MEC, 2019c, 2021a). The age profile of PSET participants further reveals a youth-dominant enrolment pattern, with over 70% aged 25 or younger, indicating that PSET remains primarily accessed by school leavers rather than adult learners (SQA, 2022). Meanwhile, the teacher workforce supporting PSET has not increased at the same rate, highlighting the need for continued investment to ensure quality and relevance. Overall, the enrolment trends underscore the expanding role of PSET in Samoa's human capital formation strategy, though continuing disparities require policy attention and strategic interventions. According to the 2020 Statistical Bulletin, of the nearly 5,000 student enrolments in PSET in Samoa, only approximately 2-3% were international students (SQA, 2020b). Data sourced from the World Bank indicated that approximately 1,000 Samoan students were pursuing higher education overseas in 2021 (WB, 2024a). Although representing less than 20% of total Samoans pursuing higher education, those who chose to pursue qualifications outside Samoa have been steadily increasing in number.

Pathways to PSET

The transition from secondary schooling to PSET in Samoa is shaped by a variety of formal and informal pathways that reflect student progression, examination outcomes, and targeted support mechanisms. Key pathways include progression through the national examination system, particularly the Samoa School Certificate (SSC) and the Samoa National Junior Secondary Certificate (SNJSC), as well as access to university or TVET programmes through

equity-oriented scholarship schemes. These pathways are critical for supporting equitable access and ensuring that students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can pursue educational opportunities beyond secondary education. The Samoa School Certificate (SSC) examination, historically held in Year 12, has served as a key credential for students seeking to enter Year 13 and then to PSET. The SSC remains a foundational academic benchmark for student readiness to undertake senior secondary study and ultimately transition to PSET (MEC, 2023e).

Samoa's education sector has limited data on transition rates from secondary to post-secondary education. This is an important data set to inform evidence-based policy and planning development, and associated intervention strategies. To address structural inequities in access to PSET, particularly in the TVET fields, Samoa has implemented targeted scholarships. These scholarships are aimed at students from lower economic backgrounds or rural areas. There are also incentives to increase female participation in traditionally male-dominated trade areas (SQA, 2023a). Between 2021 and 2023, 1,482 students received scholarships to undertake TVET programmes at NUS. Nearly 50% of these were women, a marked shift from 36% female in 2021. From 2021 to 2023, male scholarship recipients outperformed their female peers: in 2021, male pass rates were 79% compared to 66% for females; in 2023, male pass rates were 70%, while female pass rates decreased to 47% (SQA, 2023a). Both male and female pass rates declined, highlighting the need for enhanced student support mechanisms and interventions. To further strengthen the impact of PSET scholarships, greater attention is needed to learning environments and gendered barriers that affect academic achievement. Support services, mentoring and institutional reforms must accompany financial aid if improved completion rates and gender equity in TVET are to be achieved. The NUS recently commissioned a Gender Audit (pending release) to identify these barriers and develop appropriate interventions (NUS, 2023).

The Samoa Public Service Commission (PSC) administers domestic and overseas scholarship programmes primarily intended for public service capacity building, focusing on the *National Human Resource Development Priority Needs* (PSC, 2016). These scholarships offer full coverage for study at the University of the South Pacific or Fiji National University, and partial scholarships for study in Australia or Aotearoa New Zealand (PSC, 2025a). Additionally, the PSC offers three scholarship programmes for entry to the National University of Samoa: fully funded (highly ranked students), partially funded (competitive), and fully funded medical awards (PSC, 2020). All PSC schemes require participants to sign a government bond, committing to return and serve the nation. In addition, various governments and multilateral

agencies have partnered with the Samoan government to offer schemes supporting overseas post-secondary study, including the Australia Awards (PSC, 2025a) and the Manaaki New Zealand scholarship. Students in Samoa can also access the Commonwealth Scholarships, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) programmes, and multilateral schemes (e.g., World Bank/Asia Development Bank Scholarships) (PSC, 2025b).

PSET Completions

According to the 2022 PSET Statistical Bulletin (SQA, 2022), gross PSET graduation rates were reported at 36% for female students and 34% for male students. However, it is unclear from this data whether these percentages reflect enrolments or expected completions. The 2018-2020 PSET Tracer Study (SQA, 2023b) provided critical impact-oriented outcomes. Amongst the total respondents, 61% indicated they secured employment before or within one year after graduation, 16% pursued further qualifications instead of employment, while 13% indicated they were engaged in household responsibilities. The Tracer Study also demonstrated a positive correlation between qualification level and average earned income. On an encouraging note, 88% of graduates reported that their PSET qualifications aligned with their current jobs, a precise and relevant alignment between their education and the labour market.

The National University of Samoa



The National University of Samoa (NUS), established by an Act of Parliament in 1984, has grown from a small foundation programme with 45 students into Samoa's premier institution of higher learning. Initially offering diplomas and a Bachelor of Education, NUS expanded throughout the 1990s with the formation of faculties in Arts, Business, Science, Nursing and Education, and the establishment of its permanent *Le Papaigalagala* campus (NUS, 2025). The merger with Samoa Polytechnic in 2006, formalised under the NUS Act 2006, significantly broadened its TVET scope, creating a unified national higher education institution offering over 60 programmes, including the Centre for Samoan Studies and the *Oloamanu* Centre for Professional Development. Key developments include the 2014 integration of Oceania University of Medicine, the 2017 creation of the Faculty of Health Sciences, and the launch of a Maritime Training School, all of which strengthen alignment with international standards and national workforce needs. NUS has responded to public health challenges, notably COVID-19, by shifting to online learning and supporting national vaccination efforts. As of 2023, the university has 39 accredited

programmes, with growing scholarship support and infrastructure developments. Celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2024, NUS remains committed to delivering inclusive, quality education aligned to Samoa’s development goals (GoS, 2006; MEC, 2023d; NUS, 2023).

The National University of Samoa is guided by clear functional mandates, as outlined in the National University of Samoa Act 2006, Section 5:

- “the provision of education and training, including academic, technical and vocational training and continuing education at appropriate levels responsive to the needs of the people of Samoa;
- the establishment of a centre of excellence in the study of the Samoan language and culture;
- the acquisition and transmission of knowledge by teaching, consultancy, community learning and research;
- the encouragement of intellectual independence;
- the promotion of the economic and social development of Samoa;
- the realisation of the goals and guiding principles of the University as set out in its Corporate Plan;
- the recognition of prior learning or competency and providing for flexible transition into University programs;
- the establishment and maintenance of connections with public and private workplaces and the Samoan community; and,
- the establishment of associations or arrangements with an institution” (GoS, 2006, pp. 4-5).

NUS’s institutional planning is also aligned to both the national PSET Strategic Plan (2020-2024), coordinated by SQA, and the sector-wide Education Sector Plan (2019-2024) (MEC, 2019a; SQA, 2020a). NUS's strategic planning has matured over successive planning cycles, becoming more transparent and better aligned with national mandates, priorities, and cultural grounding. The Strategic Plan FY2017/18-2020/21 (“Your University, Samoa’s Future”) positioned NUS as Samoa’s flagship PSET institution, producing graduates equipped to tackle all of the country’s development challenges. The plan introduced key themes, including lifelong learning, community engagement, and a shift towards more applied, innovative learning pathways. It also positioned NUS as the national anchor of Samoan cultural preservation and national identity (NUS, 2017). Building on this, a long-term vision document called Strategy

2030 was developed, laying out an ambitious framework for growth centred on “education and employability” and “research and innovation” (NUS, 2021, p.4), and responsiveness to global shifts including climate change, digital transformation, and geopolitical uncertainties (NUS, 2021). To accompany this vision, NUS’s Corporate Plan 2024-2027 detailed how key strategies would be realised through measurable activities, and how these align with national frameworks, specifically the Pathway for the Development of Samoa, 2021-2026 (NUS, 2024). The five strategic pillars can be synthesised as follows:

1. ***Sustaining Samoan Language and Culture:*** NUS proudly carries the responsibility for preserving and promoting the Samoan language and culture. Strategy 2030 recognises this as an essential and distinct characteristic of NUS through its teaching and research functions (NUS, 2021, 2024).
2. ***Relevant and Quality Teaching and Learning:*** Through curricular review, programme and qualification accreditations, and pedagogical innovation (including blended & online learning, and micro-credentials), NUS aims to produce graduates who are ready to enter the labour force, either in Samoa or globally (NUS, 2024).
3. ***Advancing Research and Innovation:*** A dedicated push for increased relevance in research outcomes that are aligned to national priorities and strengthening Samoa’s knowledge economy. Initiatives include developing a National Research Council and greater collaboration with industry and international partners (NUS, 2024).
4. ***Community Cooperation and International Engagement:*** Renewed focus on building reciprocal and sustainable partnerships with employers, development partners, regional and international universities, and communities (NUS, 2021).
5. ***ICT and Infrastructure for Growth:*** In recognition of the evolving global landscape of digital literacy coupled with national policy mandates, NUS has prioritised investments in ICT infrastructure, thereby increasing access and impact. Additionally, as the country's primary teacher-training facility, NUS is expanding its ICT-focused curriculum. (NUS, 2024)

The National University of Samoa is strategically positioned to meet the current and future realities of the country. Through these clear and visionary strategies, grounded in equity, integrity and cultural responsibility, NUS will continue to innovate, respond and align to the needs of Samoa, first and foremost, ensuring its relevance to Samoa. Broader conversations with regional and global partners are essential, but require a focus on national needs and cultural responsibility.

National Priorities

In line with the critical policy analysis (CPA) approach outlined in Chapter 3, this section examines how Samoa's national development plan positions the National University of Samoa within Samoa's broader development agenda. Samoa's national priorities are laid out in the Pathway for the Development of Samoa (PDS). The plan centres on a people-first approach with the theme of "Empowering communities, building resilience, and inspiring growth" (MOF, 2021b, p.6), a vision for "fostering social harmony, safety and freedom for all" (MOF, 2021b, p.6), and is inclusive of five key strategic outcomes (KSOs):

1. improved social development.
2. diversified and sustainable economy;
3. security and trusted governance;
4. secured environment and climate change; and
5. structured public works and infrastructure.

The PDS guides all agencies receiving public funds, as they must align with these priorities to secure government resources. For this research, I will specifically expand on the priorities and outcomes that align with the functions of the National University (see Table 5 below). For example, Key Strategic Objective (KSO) #1: Improved Social Development states that "The Government will seek to provide all Samoans with equal access to affordable social services and livelihood/job opportunities" (MOF, 2021b, p.7). Within this KSO-1, priority area #3 aims to create an environment where all Samoans can access quality learning, as "Education remains a key driver of national economic prosperity. It also offers the means of combating inequalities and helping people to realise their full potential" (p.9). Further unpacking this priority, there are a few expected outcomes, activities and aspirations that I would like to highlight:

- "facilitating smoother transitions to the job market" (p.10);
- "improve teachers' qualifications and the quality of teaching practice" (p.10);
- "develop a coherent policy framework that promotes effective partnerships between education providers" (p.10);
- "improve the relevance of Post-School Education and Training (PSET) and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)" (p.10);

- “close the gap between the knowledge and skills generated by the sector and those required in the labour market...improving the employability of Samoa’s graduates both locally and internationally” (p.10);
- “ensuring appropriate expertise - including engineering and trades - to support public works, as well as to the development of research, science and innovation” (p.10);
- “accreditation for all Samoa’s TVET providers” (p.10); and,
- “raise the quality of Samoa’s qualifications within the region and support labour mobility” (p.10) (MOF, 2021b).

Table 05.

Mapping Alignment Between the Pathway for the Development of Samoa (PDS) and NUS’s Strategy 2030

Pathway for the Development of Samoa (PDS)	NUS Strategy 2030
<p>KSO 1: Improved Social Development - Key Priority Area 3: Quality Education</p> <p><i>Affordable access to quality education at all levels; high academic standards; enhanced and diversified relevance of education, training and programmes; emphasis on inclusive education, smoother school-to-work transitions, better-qualified teachers, coherent sector policy, and more relevant PSET and TVET closely aligned with labour market needs, including accreditation and regional recognition of qualifications.</i></p>	<p>Core Activity: Education and Employability</p> <p><i>Commitment to a distinctive, contemporary and relevant student experience that is highly personalised, inclusive and accessible; integration of online and on-campus delivery; support for learners at all career stages; employability and career thinking co-design with employer partners; high-quality short programmes that stack into postgraduate study; widening participation for vulnerable and remote learners.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar: Relevant and Quality Teaching and Learning</p> <p><i>Curriculum review, programme and qualification accreditation, blended/online learning and micro-credentials to produce work-ready graduates for Samoa and internationally.</i></p> <p><i>This directly supports the PDS emphasis on quality, relevance and improved transitions from learning into employment.</i></p>
<p>KSO 1: Improved Social Development - Key Priority Area 5: Skilled Workforce</p> <p><i>Ensuring an adequate pool of skilled workers for all sectors; a trusted, capable and skilled workforce; strategic recruitment and HR management in the public sector; workforce</i></p>	<p>Core Activity: Education and Employability</p> <p><i>Focus on employability skills, career thinking and flexible pathways tailored to national workforce needs.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar: Advancing Research and Innovation</p> <p><i>Strengthening Samoa’s knowledge economy through relevant research, industry partnerships and a proposed</i></p>

<p><i>planning that underpins national economic development and shared prosperity.</i></p>	<p><i>National Research Council.</i></p> <p><i>Together, these commitments position NUS as a key driver in producing a skilled, adaptable and future-ready workforce aligned with national HR priorities.</i></p>
<p>KSO 1: Improved Social Development - Key Priority Area 4: People Empowerment; Key Priority Area 1: Alleviating Hardship</p> <p><i>Expanding opportunities for all, especially women and youth; strengthening spiritual, cultural and leadership development; addressing hardship and poverty; enhancing resilience in managing social issues; promoting social harmony and inclusion.</i></p>	<p>Strategic Pillar: Sustaining Samoan Language and Culture</p> <p><i>NUS is the anchor for the Samoan language, culture and national identity, including the Centre for Samoan Studies and culturally grounded teaching and research.</i></p> <p>Impact Theme: Advancing Society, Culture and the Economy</p> <p><i>Strengthening a democratic and civil society; shaping a resilient, educated and skilled society; supporting Samoan heritage, Indigenous knowledge and cultural/creative industries.</i></p> <p>Our Community</p> <p><i>An inclusive university valuing diversity, wellbeing, personal integrity and growth, nurturing student and alumni communities.</i></p> <p><i>These commitments reinforce people empowerment, leadership development, and social cohesion, as envisaged in PDS KSO 1.</i></p>
<p>KSO 1: Improved Social Development - Key Priority Areas 2 & 4 and cross-cutting public health and wellbeing</p> <p><i>Improved access to quality health services; reduced communicable and non-communicable diseases; increased life expectancy; stronger community-based health promotion and support for vulnerable groups.</i></p>	<p>Impact Theme: Improving Health and Well-being</p> <p><i>Supporting high-quality healthcare through health workforce education; expanding health promotion training; translating education and research into better Pacific health outcomes; and advancing initiatives that address the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of communities.</i></p> <p><i>The integration of health sciences within NUS (e.g., the Faculty of Health Sciences and Oceania University of Medicine) operationalises this alignment with PDS public health and wellbeing priorities.</i></p>
<p>KSO 2: Diversified and Sustainable Economy - Key Priority Areas 6 - 11 (Community Development, Agriculture and Fisheries, Tourism Revitalisation, Business Innovation</p>	<p>Impact Theme: Advancing Society, Culture and the Economy</p> <p><i>Building entrepreneurial capabilities for a strong, sustainable, diverse and resilient economy.</i></p>

<p>and Growth, Increased Labour Mobility, Macroeconomic Stability)</p> <p><i>Promoting resilient, inclusive economy growth; community-based income generation; value chains in agriculture and fisheries; revitalised tourism; innovation and MSME growth; expanded labour mobility;</i></p> <p><i>Macroeconomic resilience.</i></p>	<p>Strategic Pillar: Advancing Research and Innovation</p> <p><i>Research and innovation aligned with national development priorities and private-sector needs.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar: Community Cooperation and International Engagement</p> <p><i>Partnerships with employers, development partners, regional institutions and communities to support economic diversification, labour mobility and innovation-led growth.</i></p>
<p>KSO 2 & KSO 5 - Kay Priority Area 9: Business Innovation and Growth; Key Priority Area 20: Innovative Information, Community and Technology Use</p> <p><i>ICT as a driver of productivity, e-commerce and e-services; expansion of fast, reliable and affordable internet; reducing digital divides; strengthening cyber-security and digital literacy; use of ICT to support education, health and business services.</i></p>	<p>Strategic Pillar: ICT and Infrastructure for Growth</p> <p><i>Investment in ICT infrastructure and digital literacy, including expansion of ICT-focussed curricula and teacher training, to increase access and impact.</i></p> <p>Impact Theme: Creating Smarter Technologies</p> <p><i>Enhancing digital literacy and infrastructure; providing secure digital systems; advancing technologies such as AI, sensing systems, robotics and new materials; developing technology skills for a sustainable economic future.</i></p> <p>Enterprise Capability: Innovative Digital Technology</p> <p><i>Building robust digital platforms, cybersecurity and integrated systems across the university.</i></p>
<p>KSO 4: Secured Environment and Climate Change - Key Priority Areas 15 - 18 (Build Climate Resilience, Environmental Protection and Management, Conservation and Sustainable Use of Natural Resources, Sustainable Energy Development)</p> <p><i>Strengthening resilience to climate change and disasters; protecting land, air and marine ecosystems; sustainable use of natural resources; transition to sustainable energy.</i></p>	<p>Impact Theme: Enabling a Sustainable Region</p> <p><i>Understanding, protecting, and managing land, air, and marine ecosystems; advancing the circular economy; supporting socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable organisations and communities; supporting sustainable energy transitions; and embedding internships that build capacity in sustainability practice.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar: Advancing Research and Innovation</p> <p><i>Emphasis on research in climate resilience, environmental science and sustainable development aligned to national priorities.</i></p> <p>Enterprise Capability: Safe and Sustainable Campuses</p> <p><i>Carbon-neutral by 2025 and carbon-negative by 2030, using campuses as “living laboratories” for sustainability.</i></p>

<p>KSO 1 & KSO 2 - Cultural Development, Tourism and Creative Industries (Key Priority Area 6: Community Development; Key Priority Area 8: Tourism Revitalisation)</p> <p><i>Revitalising tourism, including eco-tourism and cultural/historical sites; strengthening cultural heritage; supporting community-based initiatives and multi-skills programmes rooted in local culture.</i></p>	<p>Strategic Pillar: Sustaining Samoan Language and Culture</p> <p><i>NUS is the national custodian for Gagana Samoa, fa'a Samoa and cultural knowledge, including research and postgraduate programmes in Samoan Studies.</i></p> <p>Impact Theme: Advancing Society, Culture and the Economy</p> <p><i>Research and teaching on Samoa's rich heritage and Indigenous knowledge, and supporting cultural and creative industries, including tourism-related initiatives.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar: Community Cooperation and International Engagement</p> <p><i>Partnerships with communities and regional/global institutions that also support cultural and tourism development.</i></p>
<p>KSO 3: Security and Trusted Governance - Key Priority Areas 12 - 14 (Empowered Legislation, Improved Accountability, Dynamic Global Relations and Partnerships)</p> <p><i>Strong and accountable public institutions; effective legislation and public administration; robust partnerships and external relations.</i></p>	<p>Our Community</p> <p><i>Building a culture of trust and transparency with high levels of personal integrity.</i></p> <p>Enterprise Capabilities: Meaningful Partnerships; Effective and Efficient Ways of Working; Sustained Financial Security</p> <p><i>Community engagement strategies aligned with national priorities; efficient systems; data-informed decision-making; robust financial and governance arrangements.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar: Community Cooperation and International Engagement</p> <p><i>Strengthening national, regional and international partnerships in ways that support trusted governance and dynamic external relations.</i></p>
<p>KSO 5: Structured Public Works and Infrastructure - Key Priority Areas 19 - 21 (Responsive Public Utility Services, Innovative ICT Use, Consolidated Infrastructure Management)</p> <p><i>Reliable utilities; resilient, well-planned infrastructure; improved transport and connectivity; long-term infrastructure asset management.</i></p>	<p>Strategic Pillar: ICT and Infrastructure for Growth</p> <p><i>Investments in ICT and physical infrastructure to support teaching, research and national development.</i></p> <p>Impact Themes: Building Safe</p> <p><i>Disaster preparedness, resilient communities, sustainable infrastructure and energy.</i></p> <p>Enterprise Capability: Safe and Sustainable Campuses</p> <p><i>Optimising use of space, resilient and sustainable physical</i></p>

	<i>environments, and innovation precincts that directly support national infrastructure and utilities ambitions.</i>
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Source: MOF, 2021b; NUS, 2021.

The work of the National University of Samoa is also closely aligned with the Samoa Public Service Commission’s (PSC) National Human Resources Priority Needs (NHRPN), with a focus on producing graduates who directly contribute to building a skilled, adaptable and future-ready labour force, one that meets national priorities in education, healthcare, information technology, public administration and trades (see Table 6 below). Their investment in research, professional development, and TVET supports Samoa’s economic expansion, entrepreneurship potential, and employability, which are vital to achieving the nation’s economic development and cultural resilience goals (PSC, 2016).

Table 06.

Mapping Alignment Between the PSC’s National Human Resources Priority Needs (NHRPN) and NUS’s Strategy 2030

NHRPN	NUS Strategy 2030
<p>1. Agriculture & Environment</p>	<p>Impact Themes - Enabling a Sustainable Region; Building Safe and Resilient Communities: <i>Focus on protecting and managing land, air, and marine ecosystems; strengthening resilience to climate change and disasters; and advancing sustainable energy and circular economy practices across the curriculum, research, and internships, directly supporting environmental scientists, climate specialists, marine biologists, and related professions.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar - Advancing Research and Innovation: <i>Emphasis on research in climate resilience, environmental science, and sustainable development, aligned with national priorities in agriculture, fisheries, and the environment.</i></p> <p>Enterprise Capability - Safe and Sustainable Campuses: <i>Commitment to carbon-neutral and then carbon-negative campuses, using NUS as a “living laboratory” for sustainability, modelling the environmental practice expected of graduates and public institutions.</i></p>
<p>2. Community & Social Development</p>	<p>Impact Themes - Advancing Society, Cultures and the Economy; Building Safe and Resilient Communities: <i>Strengthening democratic and civil society, community resilience, safety and wellbeing; building an educated and skilled society; and supporting community-</i></p>

	<p><i>based responses to social challenges, aligning with community development, social policy, gender and disability roles.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar - Sustaining Samoan Language and Culture: <i>NUS, as the custodian of Gagana Samoa, fa’asamoa, and cultural knowledge, including teaching and research in Samoan Studies and Indigenous knowledge, is essential for socially grounded development practitioners and community leaders.</i></p> <p>Core Activity - Education and Employability & ‘Our Community’: <i>Commitment to inclusive, accessible learning for vulnerable and remote communities, and to a culture that values wellbeing, integrity and leadership, underpinning professions in social services, community development and justice.</i></p>
<p>3. Commerce and Industry</p>	<p>Impact Theme - Advancing Society, Culture and the Economy: <i>Explicit intention to build entrepreneurial capabilities and a strong, diverse and resilient economy, aligned with national needs for development practitioners, business managers, auditors, trade and private sector specialists.</i></p> <p>Core Activity - Education and Employability: <i>Integration of career thinking and employability skills co-designed with employer partners, and flexible pathways including short programmes that articulate to higher qualifications, supporting continuous upskilling for commerce and industry.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar - Advancing Research and Innovation: <i>Research and innovation directed towards national development priorities and private sector needs, including innovation, productivity and business growth,</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar - Community Cooperation and International Engagement: <i>Partnerships with employers, industry bodies and development partners to support MSMEs, trade, labour mobility and innovation-led economic growth.</i></p>
<p>4. Education</p>	<p>Core Activity - Education and Employability: <i>The central focus of Strategy 2030 is a commitment to a distinctive, contemporary, relevant student experience that is inclusive, blended/online and accessible to learners at all stages, which directly underpins the pipeline for teachers, curriculum developers and education specialists.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar - Relevant and Quality Teaching and Learning: <i>Curricular review, programme and qualification accreditation, micro-credentials and improved pedagogy to produce work-ready graduates for Samoa and internationally. Additionally, to improve teachers’ qualifications and the quality of teaching practice and strengthen PSET/TVET relevance to labour market needs.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar - ICT and Infrastructure for Growth: <i>Expansion of ICT-focussed curricula and teacher training, supporting national</i></p>

	<p>priorities for competence in STEM, computing and digital education across the system.</p> <p>Professional Development for NUS Staff: PSC notes that all fields at the Master's/Doctoral level are NUS professional development needs aligned with Strategy 2030's emphasis on research capacity, staff development, and a proposed National Research Council to strengthen the wider education system.</p>
<p>5. Health</p>	<p>Impact Theme - Improving Health and Wellbeing: Commitment to support high-quality healthcare through education of the health workforce, expansion of health promotion training, and translation of teaching and research into improved community health outcomes across the Pacific, directly aligned with PSC's extensive list of medical and allied health specialisations.</p> <p>Integration of Health Sciences at NUS: The presence of health sciences (including the link with the Oceania University of Medicine) positions NUS as a key pipeline for doctors, nurses and allied health professionals required in the national HR plan.</p> <p>Core Activity - Research and Innovation: Encouragement of applied and clinical research, including epidemiology, public health, and health systems, underpins PSC's priorities in communicable and non-communicable disease expertise, public health, and laboratory sciences.</p>
<p>6. Information Communication Technology (ICT)</p>	<p>Impact Theme - Creating Smarter Technologies: Focus on digital literacy, secure services and systems, and advanced technologies, with the explicit aim of building skills and technologies for a sustainable economic future, directly aligned to PSC needs for programmers, system analysts, ICT specialists and e-government experts.</p> <p>Strategic Pillar - ICT and Infrastructure for Growth: Significant investment in ICT infrastructure, digital literacy and expansion of ICT-focussed curricula and teacher training at NUS, supporting ICT capacity across both public and private sectors.</p> <p>Enterprise Capability - Innovative Digital Technology: Building robust digital platforms, cybersecurity and integrated systems across the university, which develops both technical skills and institutional practice relevant to national ICT and e-government agendas.</p>
<p>7. Infrastructure & Utility</p>	<p>Strategic Pillar - ICT and Infrastructure for Growth: Development of physical and digital infrastructure to support teaching, research and national development, including the expansion of engineering-related and</p>

	<p><i>trades-based TVET, which contributes to the pool of engineers, technicians and infrastructure specialists.</i></p> <p>Impact Themes - Building Safe and Resilient Communities; Enabling a Sustainable Region:</p> <p><i>Focus on resilient infrastructure, disaster preparedness, sustainable energy and environmental protection; highly relevant to civil, structural, environmental and utility engineering expertise listed in the PSC priorities.</i></p> <p>Enterprise Capability - Safe and Sustainable Campuses:</p> <p><i>Optimising the use of space, resilient and sustainable physical environments, and innovation precincts that model good practice in infrastructure planning, asset management, and utilities.</i></p>
<p>8. Legal</p>	<p>Impact Theme - Advancing Society, Culture and the Economy:</p> <p><i>Strengthening democratic and civil society, and shaping a resilient, educated and skilled society, provides the intellectual and ethical foundations for the legal, governance and regulatory professions identified by the PSC.</i></p> <p>Core Activity - Education and Employability & ‘Our Community’:</p> <p><i>Emphasis on personal integrity, critical thinking, ethics and leadership, and on stakeholder engagement as a core activity anchored in teaching and research; all essential for legal professionals and investigators in public service and beyond.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillars - Sustaining Samoan Language and Culture; Community Cooperation and International Engagement:</p> <p><i>Support for culturally grounded governance, public debate, and international engagement, which intersects with legal work in constitutional, administrative, international and Indigenous rights domains.</i></p>
<p>9. Public Administration</p>	<p>Core Activity - Education and Employability:</p> <p><i>Explicit focus on employability, career-long learning and flexible pathways that respond to national workforce planning; central to building a capable and trusted public service.</i></p> <p>Impact Theme - Advancing Society, Culture and the Economy:</p> <p><i>Commitment to strengthening democratic and civil society and building a resilient, skills population; this aligns with the PSC’s emphasis on capable, ethical and accountable public administration.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillars - Advancing Research and Innovation; Community Cooperation and International Engagement:</p> <p><i>Applied research on public policy, governance and development, and partnerships with government agencies and development partners, support evidence-informed public sector reform and capacity development.</i></p>

10. Tourism	<p>Impact Theme - Advancing Society, Culture and the Economy - <i>Support for cultural and creative industries, entrepreneurship and economic diversification, including tourism-related initiatives.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar - Sustaining Samoan Language and Culture: <i>Preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and Indigenous knowledge that underpin culturally grounded tourism.</i></p> <p>Strategic Pillar - Community Cooperation and International Engagement: <i>Reciprocal partnerships with communities, regional universities and international institutions that can be leveraged for tourism development, training and research.</i></p> <p>Core Activity - Education and Employability: <i>Programmes embedding employability and entrepreneurship skills provide a pipeline of graduates for tourism management, hospitality and associated services in line with PSC tourism priorities.</i></p>
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Source: PSC, 2016; NUS, 2021.

NUS also plays an instrumental role in upholding and advancing the National Culture Framework (NCF), approved in 2018. With the university’s sustained commitment to Samoan language, knowledge and research, particularly through their Centre for Samoan Studies and postgraduate qualifications, the NCF vision to elevate *fa’a Samoa* and *Gagana Samoa* can be “...safeguarded and promoted through traditional innovative means, to ensure its continuity in the future” (MEC, 2018b, p. iii).

Regionalism

As a national university in Moana Oceania, NUS is inextricably linked to the broader regionalism agenda (PIFS, 2014) through its contributions to knowledge creation, elevating Moana Oceania ways of knowing, being and doing, and regional development needs. Some of the key initiatives currently shaping educational regionalism are the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF), the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF), and the Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP).

The 2050 Strategy positions education as a key enabler for regional development and self-determination (PIFS, 2022). NUS has positioned itself as a knowledge centre that is locally contextualised while also supporting the broader regional goals of sovereignty and sustainability. For example, in the NUS Strategy 2030, the university commits to research and

education that supports environmental and climate change resilience and regional development through innovation and culturally grounded scholarship (NUS, 2021). Through actively and continuously working to improve academic quality, teaching and graduate employability, NUS is a critical partner in the success of the PacREF initiative (PIFS, 2018). Similar to the mandate of the Samoa Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Pacific Community (SPC) coordinates the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF) as the mechanism aligning national qualifications across the region. The goal of reciprocal recognition of qualifications is to facilitate greater opportunities for student and work mobility throughout the region. This alignment is crucial given the increasing emphasis on regional mobility under initiatives such as PACER Plus³², and the demand for regional labour mobility in fields such as education, health sciences, and trades (SPC, 2017).

Internationalisation

A critical consideration of equity, sovereignty, cultural continuity, contextual relevance, and global competitiveness is imperative when discussing the internationalisation of higher education in the Global South. In Samoa, particularly at the National University of Samoa, there is a constant negotiation between local relevance and global expectations. Expectations set by global frameworks, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), influence Samoa's national development strategies, which in turn feed into sector- and institution-specific strategic plans. In reviewing the SDG#4 scorecard, Samoa has made significant progress, classified as “fast progress” in the areas of completion rate (upper secondary), Out-of-school rate (lower secondary), and Out-of-school rate (upper secondary), while unfortunately the gender gap in completion rate at the upper secondary rate is “worsening for boys” (UIS, 2025, pp. 31-34).

Goals such as SDG #4, which call for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all, are important (MEC, 2023d; UN, 2025). For countries with a burgeoning higher education sector, developing nationally relevant quality assurance structures and systems can be costly and time-consuming. Many countries opt to borrow quality frameworks from outside their own contexts, thereby privileging external perspectives in quality education. Adopted by UNESCO in 2019 and approved in 2023, the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning

³² PACER Plus is an agreement designed to support economic and development across the Pacific region through trade, business and labour mobility and minimising barriers to regional trade. (<https://pacerplus.org/pacer-plus/>).

Higher Education aims to create a universal, fair and transparent system for the recognition of higher education qualifications, regardless of country (UNESCO, 2023b). As of writing this, 30 countries have signed the convention, but Samoa has not yet become a signatory. Regardless, the Convention establishes a global normative framework that will no less influence national policy and institutional practices.

Another significant force shaping higher education globally is the influence of global rankings (THE, 2022). As discussed in the Introduction chapter, these systems are structured to privilege large, well-resourced, English-speaking institutions and to rely heavily on research outputs as a metric to increase rankings. Rankings influence institutional policies globally by setting expectations for higher education institutions seeking recognition within the global academic community. For NUS, which has not yet been included in any of the major ranking systems, the implications are less about performance than about reputation. As they seek to develop international partnerships and regional students and research collaborations, they experience pressure to demonstrate their credibility to external audiences through metrics such as research outputs, academic staff qualifications, and programme diversification. However, the obstacles are extensive, particularly when such systems, tied to research such as peer-reviewed journals, are not accessible to less-resourced institutions like NUS.

Although regional and global benchmarking is a strengthening force of influence, NUS continues to centre national relevance, stated by NUS Pro-Chancellor Letuimanu'asina Professor Emma Kruse Va'ai, as "...a Samoan university with a strong place-based mission. We are a civic anchor which has preserved our culture, enhanced our environments, and sustained the local economy. However, a distinctly Samoan university cannot be viewed in isolation - we are entwined and part of the global community. Great universities build bridges; they seek connection and broaden their understanding of diverse peoples and places. Our social contract extends to our ability to learn from, teach and collaborate with the best in the world" (NUS, 2021, p.3). It is clear that while their primary responsibility is to safeguard culture and support national development, they are prepared and well situated to participate in global academic discourse.

NUS's approach to internationalisation is evident through a range of strategic partnerships, institutional memberships, and global research engagements, reflecting its dual commitment to national development and to contributing to global knowledge. NUS is a member of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), a network of more than 500 institutions

globally dedicated to building a better world through higher education. Through this, NUS benefits from collaborative research opportunities, academic mobility, scholarship schemes, and professional development programmes. Similarly, the University engages with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), an organisation working to expand access to open and distance learning. This partnership supports NUS in strengthening its digital transformation and the integration of teaching and learning, upskilling its staff, and extending access to its academic programmes nationwide (NUS, 2021, 2023, 2024).

At the bilateral level, NUS houses two key international education and training centres on its main *Le Papaigalagala* campus. The Confucius Institute, established through a partnership with the People's Republic of China, provides Samoan students with access to Mandarin language education, cultural exchange, and academic mobility programmes. The recently established Centre of Excellence in Information Technology (CIET) is the result of a Samoan-Indian Government agreement that provides high-quality ICT training to strengthen digital competencies in Samoa's workforce. These internationalisation initiatives illustrate NUS's commitment to grounding itself locally while engaging globally through strategic partnerships that build national competencies and capacities (NUS, 2021, 2023, 2024, 2025).

Collaborative Sensemaking: The Samoan Case Study

Consistent with the methodological commitments of *talanoa* outlined in Chapter 3, this collaborative sensemaking process remained attentive to relational context, participants' meaning making, and the co-constructed interpretation. This section presents the primary findings from the Samoa Case study, drawing on participants' narratives and collaborative sensemaking to explore the central questions of this research. The findings are structured thematically and by scale, with each serving as an organising lens through which the narratives are represented and discussed. Grounded in participants' lived experiences and reflective insights, they offer a nuanced understanding of the sociocultural, institutional, and contextual dynamics. In the Samoa case, collaborative sensemaking remained attentive to the relational obligations opened through *talanoa* and to the significance of *vā* as lived ethical spaces of and for connection, responsibility, and care. Interpretation was not treated as analytically separate from relationships, but as part of the obligation to honour participants' meanings in ways that are contextually grounded, respectful, and attentive to the moral textures of what had been shared. Following the sensemaking, the section turns to synthesising insights across themes to

articulate how participants' experiences respond to and illuminate the research inquiry. The section concludes by reflecting on the implications of the findings, the interplay between Samoan knowledge systems and broader theoretical considerations, and by setting the stage for the Discussion chapter.

The Voices / Narratives (Participants and Process)

It is crucial to contextualise the research participants and the settings of the *talanoa*. This includes a brief discussion on the methodological boundaries and limitations that shaped the co-construction of knowledge through this case study. In Samoan contexts, research ethics must be grounded in *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *feagaiga* (relationships), and *vā fealoa'i* (relational space), and extends beyond formal consent to include deep respect for collaboration, reciprocity and safeguarding *fa'a Samoa*. Researchers are expected to engage meaningfully so that research honours collective dignity, cultural integrity and social cohesion (Efi & Sua'ali'i-Sauni, 2008). For the Samoa case study, I engaged with stakeholders from the National University of Samoa and key external institutions whose roles intersected with Samoa's PSET. I was privileged to speak with participants from a variety of roles and institutions across a series of in-person and virtual *talanoa*, totalling 453 minutes (7 hours, 33 minutes). In-person sessions were held in participants' offices, per their request. All in-person and virtual *talanoa* were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were subsequently provided to participants for the opportunity to review and validate their content, and ensure their intended responses were clear and accurate.

In addition to these pre-arranged sessions, I had the honour to support the NUS Faculty of Education in the preparation and delivery of an international conference for the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES) while I was in Samoa. Through this experience, I also had unplanned *talanoa* (unrecorded) with many additional leaders and academics at NUS and within the Samoan government. These opportunities not only provided further insights into the research but also strengthened relationality by allowing me to become an active member of the community. This became evident in being entrusted with the immense responsibility of drafting speeches for key Government officials and in being publicly recognised by NUS leadership for my contributions to the conference's success.

Emergent Themes

Building on the contexts outlined above, it is vital to consider how these dynamics are experienced by those working with and within Samoa's higher education sector. *Talanoa* and *e-talanoa* with participants provided narrative accounts of these realities, highlighting how national priorities, regionalism and internationalisation shape institutional planning, leadership and decision-making. The following section presents the narratives thematically, which emerged across the three interconnected scales - national priorities, regionalism and internationalisation:

Centring National Priorities

1. Fragmentation, Duplication and the Strain on National Coordination
2. Cultural Imperatives and the Centrality of *Fa'a Samoa*
3. Workforce Developments, Skills Loss and Pressures from Labour Mobility
4. Resilience, Adaptation and Local Innovation

Impact of Regionalism

1. Navigating Regional Frameworks: Alignment, Burden & Opportunity
2. Regional Mobility, Quality Assurance and Regional Knowledge Leadership

Impact of Internationalisation

1. Partnership Quality, Knowledge Asymmetry and Epistemic Equity
2. Diaspora Engagement and Transnational Samoan Expertise
3. International Mobility, Brain Drain and Ethical Complexity

National Priorities, Theme #1: Fragmentation, Duplication and the Strain on National Coordination

Participants described fragmentation across government ministries and education-sector agencies, manifesting in duplicated efforts, overlapping mandates and difficulties identifying who is responsible for leading particular initiatives. One participant observed that Samoa appears to be...

"...doing the same thing all over again by different agencies...who exactly is supposed to take the lead" (P37, Government Employee).

Such duplication not only consumes limited resources but also affects the National University of Samoa, which often navigates misaligned expectations and inconsistent system-wide coordination.

These pressures are further intensified by competing demands from development partners, whose reporting requirements can displace attention from Samoa's own policy commitments. As noted by P37 (Government Employee),

"We invest our time in trying to meet the deadlines...Then we neglect the national priorities that we have agreed [on] in our Pathway for the Development of Samoa."

This tension sits alongside deeper cultural dimensions that shape how Samoan institutions understand their responsibilities and relationships.

National Priorities, Theme #2: Cultural Imperatives and the Centrality of Fa'a Samoa

Participants emphasised that *fa'a Samoa* is not supplementary to higher education, but foundational to how institutions understand their purpose, responsibilities and relationships. Cultural principles such as *vā* (relational space), respect, reciprocity and collective responsibility were framed as ethical norms that should guide curriculum design, pedagogy, and partnerships. For staff at the NUS, questions of quality and relevance were inseparable from how well programmes sustained and enacted these values. At the heart of this cultural framing is the Samoan understanding of *vā* as an ethical and epistemological space that must be nurtured. One participant described the impact of partnerships that failed to uphold reciprocity. When there is no mutuality...

"...the vā is so wide, and the vā is so deep, you cannot access it" (P1, University Employee)

Here, the *vā* is not simply interpersonal harmony, but a measure of whether partnerships are attentive to power, respect and shared benefit. When the *vā* is neglected, the partnership itself becomes untenable, regardless of the technical advantages it might promise.

Participants linked this relational ethic directly to everyday teaching practice. As a research participant explained,

"We try our best to get our feet grounded and ensure that we provide quality teaching and ensure that learning is tailor-made to the learning needs and learning styles of our students." (P2, University Employee)

Designing learning is not only about student-centred pedagogy, but about anchoring teaching in Samoan cultural worldviews, epistemologies and ontologies. The centring of *vā* thus emerges as both a conceptual framework and a practical guideline for shaping educational engagement that is responsive to students' lived contexts.

Cultural imperatives also inform how institutional success is defined. Rather than prioritising international rankings or publication metrics, participants framed NUS's distinctive strengths

in its contributions to the Samoan language, culture and knowledge. As P37 (Government Employee) put it,

“While we may not be in terms of the rankings and publication-wise, we are not there, but we certainly are confident that we are the number one university in terms of Samoan studies and culture. So, to us, that is the most important ranking that we believe counts.”

This repositioning of what “counts” reflects a deliberate move away from external measures towards Indigenous criteria of value, with Samoan cultural and intellectual leadership at the centre. Participants expressed concerns about the internalisation of Western ideologies within local institutions. P2 (University Employee) reflected,

“...one of the demoralising, or discouraging things that I've encountered in my own professional circles and career development, is when we have our own people pushing the agenda of the Western or the donors, having no appreciation for the context, the background, and the people and the content. And when I hear people in authority speaking as if they were agents of those people...It's quite discouraging because we've been so indoctrinated with Western influences that even within our own culture.”

This participant’s reflection suggests that colonially informed ideologies persist not only through external pressures, but also through local endorsement and aspiration. P2 (University Employee) continued to lament that....,

“...there is a lot of status being given to things that are of Western origin, ideas, institutions, compared to our own Indigenous...what we value.

This points to a deeper epistemic struggle over which knowledges are legitimised within higher education in Samoa.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate how *fa'a Samoa* operates as a national imperative that shapes institutional priorities, pedagogical practice and partnership decisions. Cultural values are not peripheral to policy concerns but are the criteria through which national priorities are interpreted and enacted. P38 (University Employee) described a deliberate ‘Samoanisation of the university’, where institutional structures and symbols were mapped to reflect Samoan family and village logics:

“We all have families. We all have villages. We all understand the whole process as protocols and lines of communication. That basically [was] transferred here...We started from the bottom. We have faculties that house the different departments. We think of an appropriate Samoan equivalent from the family to translate, like head of department...there was a term for the head of the department, a term for the dean of the

faculty...all these are terms that are brought across, they're familiar" (P38, University Employee).

The same participant also shared that...

"...our students, our people, when they come to the university, they don't feel like they are in a foreign environment...they feel they are part of the local space. You feel proud that you're Samoan" (P38, University Employee).

This has significant implications for how NUS navigates regionalism and internationalisation, as subsequent themes will explore. Any partnership that fails to respect the *vā* risks undermining not only institutional partnerships but the broader mandate of sustaining Samoan knowledge and identity through higher education. Participants linked these priorities directly to concerns about national workforce development and the long-term sustainability of the education system. These narratives argue that *fa'a Samoa* operates not only as a set of interpersonal values but also as an organising principle for institutional design and symbolism. NUS was re-imagined as an extension of the Samoan relational space rather than a foreign bureaucratic space. This further supports participants' broader framing of NUS as a national institution charged with sustaining Samoan language, identity and epistemic authority.

National Priorities, Theme #3: Workforce Development, Skills Loss and Pressures of Labour Mobility

Labour mobility emerged as a critical national concern, especially in relation to Australia's PALM and New Zealand's Regional Seasonal Employment (RSE) schemes. Participants described the sudden and large-scale outward flow of skilled workers as destabilising for Samoa's workforce and for institutions such as NUS that invest in education and training. As P2 (University Employee) explained,

"You think you have saturated the market...and then in one go, all 700 of them go. We don't have enough time to train people to replace the gap."

The temporal mismatch between how quickly workers leave and how slowly new cohorts can be trained and educated creates persistent fragility in national capacity.

While acknowledging that families benefit economically from remittances earned through overseas employment, participants underscored that the national system absorbs the loss,

"All those people will go and prop up the economies of those bigger sisters and bigger brothers and leave us all with that gap to fill" (P2, University Employee).

This framing shifts the discussion from individual success stories to questions of distributive economic and long-term development. The issue is not labour mobility per se, but the structural

conditions under which Samoa's human resources are consistently pulled into external labour markets with limited mechanisms to incentivise return or reinvestment.

These concerns place NUS in a complex position. On the one hand, the university is mandated to support national development by aligning programmes with workforce needs and emerging sectors. On the other hand, it must confront the reality that graduates with in-demand skills may leave, deepening domestic shortages. Participants described this as an ethical dilemma. How do they honour individual aspirations while safeguarding Samoa's long-term educational and economic resilience? In response, NUS has sought to strengthen its alignment with national priorities through initiatives such as staff work attachments, designed to maintain,

"...not just relevance, but currency in their practice and what's happening within their fields in Samoa." (P2, University Employee)

NUS demonstrates a strong commitment to national priorities, particularly through responsiveness to local development needs, cultural preservation and workforce alignment. This is often challenged by limited resources and external pressures but remains a central institutional goal. NUS's institutional mission is deeply connected to serving Samoa:

"We've always wanted to ensure...that we are responsive to the national needs, especially the national development needs and the HR needs of the country." (P2, University Employee)

These strategies reflect a broader commitment to ensuring that higher education remains aligned to local labour markets and community needs, even as it prepares graduates for participation in regional and international work environments. The labour mobility dilemma, therefore, underscores the importance of viewing NUS not only as a provider of credentials, but as a national institution negotiating the tension between external labour mobility and the imperative of sustaining Indigenous capacity.

National Priorities, Theme #4: Resilience, Adaptation and Local Innovation

Despite structural constraints, participants expressed determination and agency. As P37 (Government Employee) put it,

"We're not perfect...We're still moving, and we're still trying to do the best."

This reflects a commitment to continuous improvement and cultural resilience. Across the sector, initiatives such as strengthening programme quality, enhancing digital learning and building institutional capacity were described as examples of locally driven adaptation rooted in Samoan values. These national-level dynamics intersect directly with Samoa's participation in regional systems of collaboration and quality assurance.

Despite structural inequities, participants highlighted adaptation and resilience in NUS and the broader Samoan educational system. There is an emphasis on contextualising pedagogy, responding to student needs, and elevating Samoan epistemologies:

“We ensure that learning is tailor-made to the learning needs and learning styles of our students” (P2, University Employee).

Educators express pride in locally driven curricula and a deep commitment to cultural preservation, particularly in the face of globalisation and externally imposed metrics.

“If you have a good grasp of cultural understanding and background, those are the things you would use to relate to what the students know, so that when you introduce these, they would be able to make sense...it is up to the educators to establish the links to consolidate understanding that is relevant for students’ development” (P1, University Employee)

Regionalism, Theme #1: Alignment, Burden and Opportunity

Regional frameworks such as PacREF, the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF) and EQAP shape Samoa’s engagement with shared education standards, mobility pathways and regional development priorities. Participants acknowledged the values of these mechanisms, noting their importance for strengthening quality and supporting mobility. However, they also pointed to the administrative and compliance burden.

Regionalism presents both opportunities and complications. It enables resource sharing and collaboration, but also leads to duplication, unclear leadership roles, and the possible displacement of national agendas in favour of regional frameworks.

As P37 (Government Employee) noted, the demands of regional projects can overtake national priorities,

“We do not meet some of the things we have planned nationally...”

...due to the effort and cost required to satisfy regional timelines and reporting requirements. This reflects a tension between regional solidarity and national autonomy. Within this regional context, the opportunity for increased mobility of qualifications emerged as another area of both benefit and challenge.

The Government sees benefits in streamlining regional partnerships, but confusion still exists over coordination:

“It’s like doing the same thing all over again by different agencies...who exactly is supposed to take the lead, and with what sort of support?” (P37, Government Employee)

While regional projects support educational initiatives, they risk displacing national priorities:

“We invest our time in trying to meet the deadlines...of the support that is given to us. Then we neglect the national priorities that we have agreed [on] in our Pathway for the Development of Samoa.” (P37, Government Employee)

Participants emphasised the need for alignment and strategic incorporation:

“We need to be strategic on how we incorporate these things so that it not only meets the needs of the country, but also the donor partner.” (P37, Government Employee)

Regionalism, Theme #2: Mobility, Quality Assurance and Regional Knowledge Leadership

For participants in Samoa, regionalism is more than a technical exercise in aligning qualifications. It is also a project of mobility, quality assurance and knowledge leadership. Regional frameworks and initiatives open additional pathways for NUS graduates to work across Moana Oceania, while simultaneously positioning NUS as both a contributor to and beneficiary of shared standards. These arrangements introduce expectations and demands that must be negotiated alongside national priorities and institutional capacity.

Participants highlighted the significance of regional qualification structures, particularly for teachers. Collaborative work on a Pacific Teachers Regional Qualification was described as an attempt to standardise teacher competence and enable cross-border mobility. One participant noted that the emerging framework is intended “*for all teachers*”, involving “*eleven countries*”, and is explicitly designed so that “*you can work in any of the 11*”, while still reflecting the cultural dimensions of teaching and learning (P1, University Employee). This regional qualification aligns with NUS’s commitment that its programmes prepare graduates for both domestic and regional employment opportunities. As one participant emphasised, NUS’s role is to ensure that programmes are...

“...robust and aligned to the national competency standards and also responsive to the needs of industry and the local stakeholders”, such that “at the end of the day, we want to ensure that our graduates get a job and should they migrate overseas, that their qualification is recognised when they move overseas” (P2, University Employee).

Regional TVET partnerships illustrate how mobility and quality assurance intersect in practice. Through collaboration with the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC), for example, NUS hosts learners from across the region in hospitality programmes. As one participant explained,

“There are students from countries like Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and PNG...enrolled in hospitality courses. And this is through the NUS hospitality programme and the Australian Pacific Polytechnic Certificate that supports that programme. APTC pays students’ fees...the APTC students live in the NUS housing” (P1, University Employee).

Such partnerships position NUS as a regional hub for skills development and strengthening external confidence in the quality of its academic provision. However, they also raise questions about equity. While regional students benefit from scholarships, local students often cannot access equivalent support due to limited public funding, reinforcing existing inequities.

Beyond frameworks and student mobility, participants portrayed Samoa as a significant contributor to regional knowledge and Indigenous scholarship. Rather than being a passive recipient of external standards, NUS is seen as a site where Samoan epistemologies are developed, documented and shared. One participant described efforts within their science faculty and the Centre for Samoan Studies to secure recognition for,

“Indigenous Science”, arguing that it is “a body of knowledge that’s not recognised by Western scientists, but is a legitimate body of knowledge” (P2, University Employee).

They pointed to collaborative work documenting Samoan fishing methods as an example, noting that...

“The Samoan fishing calendar has been successfully used by the meteorological office to put out its annual Palolo harvesting season” (P2, University Employee).

Regional relevance, therefore, can be viewed as grounded not in conformity to external metrics, but in the practical and cultural value of Samoan knowledge for the wider region. These scholarly contributions are embedded within NUS’s institutional strategy to foreground Samoan language and culture in teaching and learning. NUS has progressively expanded offerings from a single foundation course in Samoan language and culture to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Samoan Studies and Development Studies. Samoan language and society courses have been made compulsory across degree programmes, such that,

“...everyone takes it, regardless of whether you’re taking a Bachelor of Science [or] Education” (P2, University Employee),

...alongside courses in academic English, research methods and ICT. This model produces graduates who are not only regionally mobile, but also grounded in *fa’a Samoa*, reinforcing Samoa’s reputation as a regional reference point for Indigenous language, culture and pedagogy.

The participants’ narratives portray regionalism as a layered space of opportunity and obligation. Regional qualification initiatives and TVET partnerships expand mobility and increase trust in NUS’s quality. However, they also require additional compliance work and expose tensions in how benefits and resources are distributed between local and regional constituencies. Samoa’s leadership in documenting Indigenous sciences and the arts, strengthening Samoan Studies and shaping culturally informed teacher qualifications.

Regionalism also facilitates the circulation of Samoan knowledge outward, informing practices and debates across Moana Oceania. This positioning adds further texture to NUS's navigation of regional commitments alongside national priorities and the demands of internationalisation.

Internationalisation, Theme #1: Partnership Quality, Knowledge Asymmetry and Epistemic Equity

Participants' reflections on internationalisation ranged from caution to appreciation to frustration. While international partnerships were recognised as potential avenues for capacity-building, exposure and resource mobilisation, many were experienced as rhetorical, performative, extractive or misaligned with Samoan priorities. Formal agreements such as Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) were cited as examples of this ambiguity. As P1 (University Employee) observed,

"...we have these [Memorandum of Understandings] MOUs. Yes, but can we rely on that ...there is no clear-cut answer".

The presence alone of an MOU did not necessarily guarantee active collaboration, responsiveness to Samoan needs, or long-term benefit to NUS.

Underlying these concerns were asymmetries in power and knowledge. Participants described experiences when international partners-controlled research agendas, authorship, and dissemination. P1 (University Employee) explained that,

"publishing with aspiring authors may not be in [international academics'] interests...so you get to a point where you feel that you do not want to pursue that relationship."

These asymmetries were not only logistical or technical, but also relational and epistemic. When collaboration is conditional on unequal recognition, Samoan academics may withdraw from partnerships that undermine their dignity or marginalise their intellectual contributions. The consequences of these asymmetries extend well beyond individuals and the University. As P37 (Government Employee) noted,

"...you find that most of the research is published in international journals that none of the Samoans would read and utilise to inform policies and, I guess, improve the livelihood in Samoa. So, I think that's one of the areas we try also to make the metrics relevant to Samoa rather than make it so that we are on par with other universities overseas."

This critique reflects a double displacement. Research about Samoa is often produced for external audiences, and institutional success is measured against global metrics that do not reflect local impact or relevance.

Participants also highlight the epistemic tensions that arise when imported theoretical frameworks are privileged over *fa'a Samoa*. Reflecting on students' struggles with Western theories, P1 (University Employee) recounted that some students,

"...only learned those theories so I could pass," prompting the realisation that *"...there is a need to establish a connection between Western theories and cultural relevance. In essence, there should be a connection between how they live, how they were brought up, and their schooling. For us, it's like we don't have Samoan theories. How do you expect these kids to understand Western theories without some connection to their background?"* (P2, University Employee)

This concern goes beyond curricular relevance but raises questions about whose knowledge is recognised as theory and how Samoan epistemologies can be developed and legitimised within global academic discourse. At the same time, participants noted shifts as emerging scholars from Moana Oceania contribute more to research and publishing spaces. P2 (University Employee) indicated that,

"...now that people are writing articles and theses, there would be more information on the nexus between the two. Moreover, writers can be quoted."

This signals a gradual rebalancing where Samoan and other Moana Oceania scholars disseminate research that bridges Indigenous knowledge systems and international scholarship. Internationalisation is most transformative when it amplifies local voices rather than unilaterally channelling research.

Alongside these epistemic and relational asymmetries, participants also highlighted the bureaucratic and temporal pressures associated with donor-funded initiatives. External reporting and monitoring requirements were described as both unavoidable and exhausting, placing additional demands on staff and institutional systems. P37 (Government Employee) emphasised the need for *"common ground"* so that external requirements *"are not as hard on the people"* implementing them. Donor partnerships are viewed by the Samoan participants not only as financial support but also as forms of governance that shape how time, labour, and attention are allocated within NUS. This reinforces concerns that, unless negotiated carefully, international partnerships can reconfigure institutional priorities around external timelines and accountability regimes, rather than Samoan-defined goals and relational ethics.

These narratives suggest that the challenge is not whether NUS participates in internationalisation, but on what and whose terms. For NUS, the question is how to move from transactional and performative partnerships towards relational, reciprocal collaborations that respect the *vā*, recognise Samoan intellectual leadership, and contribute to epistemic equity. This aligns with the wider thesis's argument that internationalisation must be reimagined as a form of knowledge diplomacy grounded in Indigenous values, rather than a neutral or technical project of global integration. Participants noted that Samoans in the diaspora can support rebalancing these dynamics by advocating from within overseas institutions, as explored further next.

Internationalisation, Theme #2: Diaspora Engagement and Transnational Samoan Expertise

Participants portrayed the Samoan diaspora as a significant, if insufficiently mobilised, resource within internationalisation. Rather than being positioned only as a “*loss*” to overseas labour markets, Samoans in the diaspora were described by participants as essential interlocutors who can advocate for Samoa's interests, open doors with foreign institutions and donors, and sustain culturally grounded relationships across distances. As P1 (University Employee) observed,

“Some of those people who are outside have been very influential in terms of negotiating how they could support Samoa.”

In this sense, Samoans in the diaspora function as relational brokers, drawing on their credibility in both Samoan and overseas contexts to facilitate opportunities, interpret expectations and guide partnerships that are responsive to Samoan priorities and *fa'a Samoa*.

Diaspora scholars and professionals were also seen as contributing to global knowledge networks, particularly when they maintain active connections with NUS. Their involvement in joint teaching, collaborative research, supervision, and policy advice can help counter some of the epistemic asymmetries described in earlier themes by amplifying Samoan perspectives in international fora and legitimising Samoan epistemologies and ontologies within global academia. When internationalisation partnerships are grounded in *fa'a Samoa* and value the *vā*, Samoans in the diaspora can expand the reach of Samoan priorities rather than external agendas or privileging Western epistemologies or research methodologies.

Participants were cautious about assuming that all engagement from the diaspora is automatically beneficial or equitable. International mobility can deepen capacity gaps at home if those who leave do not sustain active connections with NUS, echoing concerns about brain drain and labour mobility outlined in earlier themes. Questions also arose about representation

and accountability, such as which voices from the diaspora are recognised by international partners, and to whom are they ultimately accountable - overseas employers, funders, or communities in Samoa? Without careful attention to these dynamics, Samoans in the diaspora may reproduce hierarchies, speaking for local colleagues rather than with them.

Overall, engagement with the Samoan diaspora was viewed as a site of possibility. The key issue was how to facilitate reciprocal forms of transnational Samoan expertise (e.g. co-authored research, visiting professorships, mentorship, policy collaboration) that strengthen national priorities and cultural integrity. Through such a design, the diaspora is not the endpoint of international mobility, but a relational infrastructure for reimagining internationalisation as a practice of ongoing, culturally grounded partnership.

Internationalisation, Theme #3: International Mobility, Brain Drain and Ethical Complexity

As discussed earlier in the National Priorities, Theme #3, labour mobility schemes were shared as an example of mobility that benefits families but undermines the national workforce. P2 (University Employee) outlined the loss of trained workers to external labour markets as a direct threat to educational investments,

“We don’t benefit...all those people will go and prop up the economies of those bigger ‘sisters’ ...leave us with that gap to fill.”

This highlights the complex intersections between economic dependency and educational sovereignty, raising concerns about reciprocity and reinforcing the need for more ethical and sustainable mobility pathways. P38 (University Employee) framed this as a question of ethics, equity and informed choice, suggesting that leaders need to...

“...collapse that thing in a way that provides equity” between those who leave and those who stay, including by helping young people understand that *“even though the salaries in Australia and New Zealand are much higher, in reality, they equate to the same level...because it goes to quality of life and cost of living too”*.

While labour mobility schemes risk the loss of the Samoan workforce, participants saw diaspora scholars and professionals as a distinct mobility trajectory with the potential to reinvest expertise in Samoa (see Internationalisation, Theme #2).

Summary of Multi-Scalar, Collaborative Sensemaking

At the national, regional, and international scales, participants discussed a higher education landscape characterised by ongoing negotiation for national alignment. At the national level,

NUS is mandated to prepare for workforce needs, sustain the Samoan language and culture, and support national development agendas. Simultaneously, they are expected to absorb the impacts from increasing labour mobility and fragmented policy coordination. While regional frameworks (e.g., PacREF and PQF) provide platforms for shared educational standards and the portability of academic qualifications, they were also identified as imposing compliance burdens and diverting attention from national priorities. Participants' concerns at the national and regional levels also extended to fragmented coordination and overlapping frameworks, which drain institutional efforts. Internationalisation partnerships, meanwhile, offer access to resources, networks and recognition, but also reproduce knowledge asymmetries and external metrics that sit uneasily with *fa'a Samoa*.

P38 (University Employee) captured this contextual complexity in spatial terms,

“Generally, you understand the international space, the local space. And in the local space, you have many little spots...the council, the cabinet, the parliament, the village, the chiefs in the village, the families, and all that kind of stuff. We are put in these places...it's a fortunate place to be in if you want to influence changes.”

This description further reflects the multi-scalar sensemaking evident across participants' narratives. Decisions about partnerships, labour needs or curriculum are not made at a single 'level', but in the interplay between universities, institutions, governments, villages and extended families. For leaders such as P38, occupying these overlapping spaces is both an opportunity for influence and a source of political and ethical tension.

Participants expressed confidence in Samoa's capacity to navigate this complexity through cultural strength, strategic selectivity and relational ethics. *Fa'a Samoa* functions as a cross-cutting reference point for evaluating whether partnerships at each scale uphold reciprocity, respect and other cultural values. Where these conditions are not met, partnerships are experienced as extractive, symbolic or demoralising. Where they are honoured, regional and international connections are seen as extensions of Samoan priorities rather than departures from them.

These findings reinforce the thesis's central contention that higher education partnerships in Moana Oceania cannot be understood solely through technical or economic viewpoints. In the Samoan case, national priorities, cultural imperatives and multi-scalar governance arrangements intersect in ways that foreground questions of epistemic sovereignty, relational accountability and equity.

The following four case study chapters build on these insights to consider how the Samoan case both reflects and complicates broader debates about Indigenous knowledge, national priorities,

regionalism, and internationalisation across the Moana Oceania region, and what this implies for reimagining higher education as relational and context responsive.

Research Significance and Implications

The National University of Samoa centres national priorities through a commitment to cultural relevance, capacity-building, and local responsiveness. However, regionalism and internationalisation, while offering resources and visibility, can disrupt or dilute national priorities when not grounded in relationality, reciprocity and shared decision-making. Participants called for more equitable partnerships that recognise and integrate Samoan epistemologies, governance structures and long-term development goals, rather than treating these as constraints to be managed.

The Samoan case underscores the importance of understanding higher education through epistemic sovereignty, relational accountability and equity, and cultural frameworks (e.g., *fa'a Samoa* and the *vā*). By doing so, the navigation process for the national university can be both valued and legitimised.

Reflections on Research in Samoa

Conducting research in Samoa required careful attention to context, relational ethics and the responsibilities of working as a non-Samoan researcher in Samoan spaces. As outlined in the Research Design chapter, the study was framed through social constructionism and the Moana Oceania concepts of *motutapu* and *wansolwara*, alongside *talanoa* as a dialogic, relational methodology. These commitments were not abstract, but shaped fieldwork decisions, from how invitations were extended, to how *talanoa* were co-constructed, to how transcripts and preliminary analyses were returned to participants for review, clarification and validation.

In Samoan contexts, research ethics must be grounded in *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *feagaiga* (sacred relationships) and *vā fealoa'i* (relational space). This meant that the *talanoa* were not just data-collection sessions, but engagements for *vā* development. Returning transcripts and sharing preliminary interpretations were practical expressions of this commitment. Participants did not just provide narratives; they also co-constructed and sharpened the analysis, clarifying conceptual distinctions or drawing attention to additional points that had been overlooked.

The Samoan case study also generated methodological contributions. First, it demonstrates the value and limits of pursuing a “credible outsider” (p. 51) status (Porisky, 2023). While previous involvement in Moana Oceania education and Indigenous methodologies provided a foundation

for relational trust, it did not erase power differentials related to nationality, mobility, institutional affiliation, or language. Ongoing reflexivity was necessary to interrogate how these positionalities might have shaped what participants chose to share, how participants interpreted questions, and how analytical interpretations were constructed.

Secondly, the Samoan case study highlights the importance of relational ethics in cross-cultural research. Decisions about anonymisation, representation, and interpretation were not only interpersonal but also entangled with national agendas, institutional sensitivities, and regional politics. For example, discussions about labour mobility, scholarship schemes or donor conditionalities carried implications for multiple participants. Negotiating these sensitivities required careful judgement about how to honour participants' honest narratives.

Finally, the collaborative sensemaking process in Samoa affirmed the value of Indigenous-centred and relational methodologies in research. Rather than positioning policy frameworks and institutional strategies as neutral, participants invited an analysis that treated *fa'a Samoa*, *vā* and service (*tautua*) as central to how educational priorities are conceptualised and enacted. The themes identified in this case study should be read through relationally interpreted lenses of understandings shaped through dialogues, accountability, and contexts. This has implications not only for future research in Samoa, but for how higher education in Samoa is developed as a space where Indigenous knowledge, national priorities, regionalism and internationalisation meet and are continually renegotiated.

Emerging and Continuing Priorities

Samoa's education sector continues to prioritise culturally responsive and contextually grounded policies that reflect both national aspirations and international expectations. Emerging and ongoing priorities include expanding access to post-secondary, technical and vocational education to meet the aspirations for national development and demands of an evolving labour market. This requires closer alignment between secondary and PSET pathways, improved data on transitions and completions, and deepened integration of inclusive education practices (MEC, 2023d).

Demographic trends in Samoa sharpen the urgency of these priorities. A youthful population and persistent regional disparities in access signify that higher education planning cannot be limited to the Apia urban centre. Expanding opportunities to Northwest Upolu, the rest of Upolu, and Savai'i is necessary to minimise geographic inequities and extend the benefits of PSET. At the same time, gendered trends in participation (e.g., higher female enrolment in

PSET but differentials in completion and progression) call for more targeted support, interventions, and careful monitoring.

National priorities emphasise quality, relevance, access and sustainability, and link education to broader aims of social harmony and economic resilience. The Samoa 2040 Agenda and the PDS anchor these commitments to regional and global mandates, including PacREF, the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals. For Samoa, these are not merely external obligations but are interpreted and reworked through *fa'a Samoa* and national development priorities.

NUS is positioned as both a national institution and as an influential regional partner. Its mandates to provide education and training responsive to Samoan needs, to serve as a centre of excellence in Samoan language and culture, and to contribute to national development closely align with participants' emphasis on cultural integrity, workforce relevance, and social cohesion. The Samoan case study shows how these mandates are enacted in practice, and how they are tested by regionalism and internationalisation.

Challenges

Despite significant reforms, persistent challenges undermine the full realisation of Samoa's educational goals. Among these are the fragmentation of policy-making authority and sector coordination. The division of responsibilities among the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), the Samoa Qualifications Authority (SQA), and NUS creates overlapping and, at times, duplication. Separate TVET frameworks, misaligned planning cycles, and variable consultation processes illustrate that a sector-wide approach remains aspirational rather than fully embedded. Participants also highlighted the heavy demands from global, regional and donor-driven accountability processes. Meeting the reporting, monitoring, and evaluation requirements of multiple partners consumes significant time and administrative energy, often diverting staff from national priorities. As P37 (Government Employee) observed, the effort invested in meeting external deadlines can delay the implementation of work agreed in the PDS and institutional strategic plans. Efforts to centralise coordination of these requirements through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance have improved oversight. Still, they have not eliminated the tension between responsiveness to external partners and commitment to national priorities.

Geographic and socio-economic disparities further complicate governance challenges. Students in rural areas face greater barriers to educational attendance, participation and progression, often linked to poverty, transport costs and household responsibilities. Limited social welfare systems mean that economic instability translates to disrupted schooling and the risk of dropout. At the PSET level, incomplete data on transitions, completions and post-graduation outcomes limit evidence-informed planning and make it difficult to assess how effectively the system is meeting national human resource needs.

Labour mobility and international scholarship schemes bring further complexity in the Samoan case study. While they provide income and educational opportunities for individuals and families, they also generate workforce gaps in key sectors and undermine the nation's ability to recover its investments in education. Participants' reflections on such schemes highlighted the ethical dilemmas of balancing individual aspirations, household remittances and national capacity-building. The risk is that mobility becomes structurally asymmetrical, whereby Samoa supplies labour and talent to resource-rich countries while it struggles to sustain sufficient qualified talent at home.

Finally, knowledge production and dissemination in Samoa continue to be constrained by epistemic hierarchies. Research on Samoa is often published in international journals that are difficult to access locally and may not align with national priorities. Institutional metrics that privilege publications and international rankings reinforce these hierarchies, rather than incentivising applied research that is relevant, impactful and circles back to the country. Participants' critiques in this area underscore the broader theme of epistemic inequity and the need to recalibrate impact measurement to reflect Indigenous and national priorities better.

Opportunities

Despite these challenges, Samoa's education system holds promising opportunities for innovation and transformation. The development of national frameworks, such as the Inclusive Education Policy (MEC, 2023d), the National Teacher Development Framework (MEC, 2018a), and the Education Sector Plans (MEC, 2013; 2019a), demonstrated a shift towards more systemic and coherent approaches to quality, teacher development, and equity. These provide platforms for aligning curriculum, assessment and professional learning with both national priorities and Samoan values, including stronger attention to learners who have historically been marginalised.

NUS's strategic dual identity as a comprehensive national university and a centre of excellence in Samoan Studies enables it to anchor higher education in *fa'a Samoa* while maintaining regional and global relevance. The expansion of Samoan language and culture programmes, compulsory Samoan studies courses across degrees, and investments in digital learning and ICT all point to an institution actively negotiating how to be simultaneously local, regional and globally relevant. When coupled with deliberate partnership strategies, these can help reposition NUS as a leader in regional and international collaborations.

At the system level, recent efforts to strengthen coordination across MEC, SQA, and NUS, including Sootaga Mautu Fa'aleaoaoga and sector planning, have created opportunities for more integrated decision-making and more precise lines of responsibility. If these are adequately resourced and genuinely participatory, they can reduce duplication, clarify roles, and ensure that donor and regional initiatives are more aligned with national priorities and Samoan epistemologies.

Participants' narratives highlight relational opportunities that extend well beyond policy. Samoan scholars in the diaspora, regional networks and internationalisation partnerships in areas such as teacher education, Indigenous research methodologies and climate resilience offer opportunities grounded in shared histories and mutual respect. When guided by *fa'a Samoa* and the ethic of *vā*, these relationships can support more equitable forms of knowledge exchange and capacity-building, thereby reimagining internationalisation as knowledge diplomacy rather than one-way transfer.

The significance and implications of the Samoan case study illuminate how a national university serves as a site of negotiation between Indigenous knowledge systems, national development priorities, regional frameworks and global higher education expectations. It also explores the kinds of institutional, policy and relational shifts required if higher education in Moana Oceania is to be genuinely relational, context-responsive and oriented towards Indigenous futures.

Research Futures

Future research must critically examine the interactions of policy, practice and local context. There is also a need for longitudinal studies that trace the effectiveness of recent reforms in inclusive education, teacher development and PSET governance. Critical ethnographic and participatory approaches could illuminate how educators and learners navigate tensions

between global education models and local cultural frameworks and provide a more nuanced understanding of educational transformation in similar contexts. Ultimately, research should contribute to a more holistic and equitable education system by informing policies that are both context-sensitive and strategically future-focused. NUS is working to reframe higher education internationalisation as a collaborative, values-based, reciprocal and contextual process.

Chapter 5. Case Study: Kingdom of Tonga

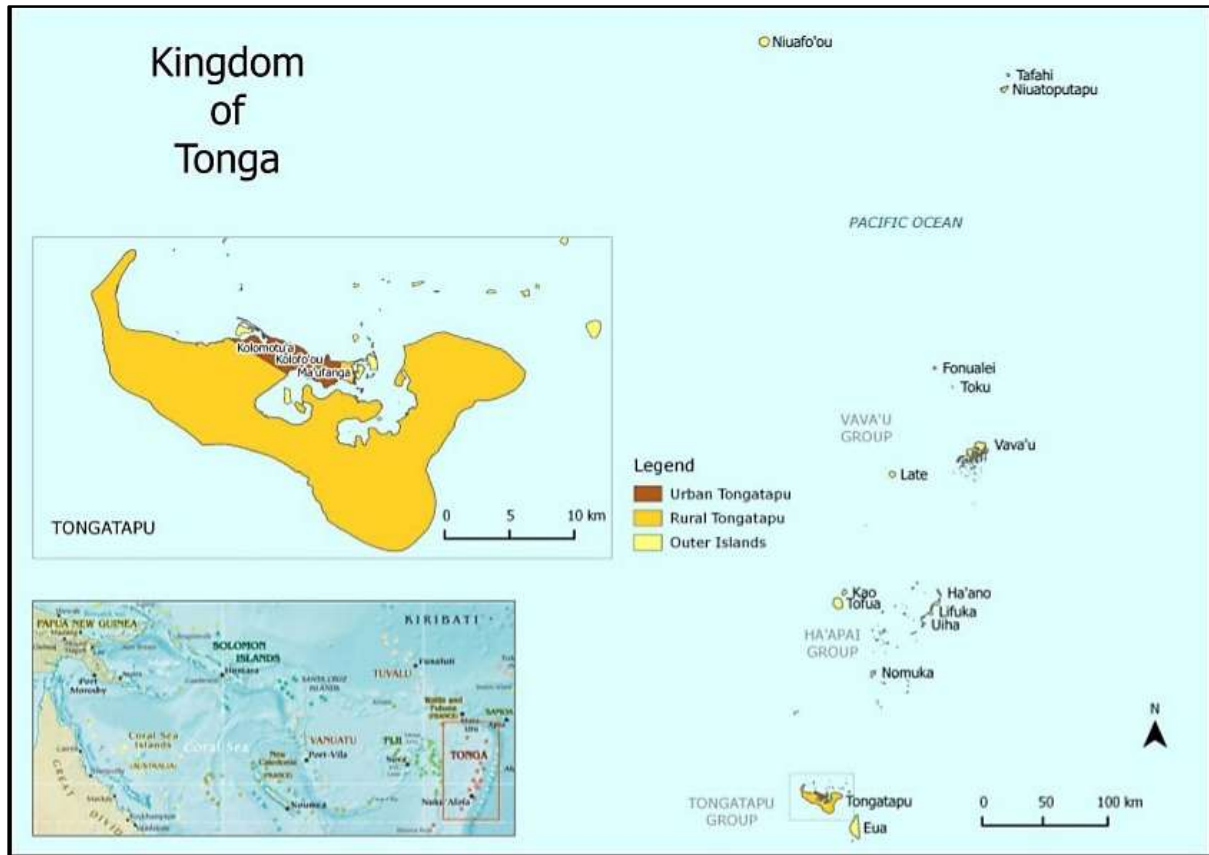
This chapter situates this multi-scale framed, multi-country research through the lens of the Kingdom of Tonga, informed by Moana Oceania and postcolonial scholarship, to contextualise the case study analysis. It examines the nation's demographic composition, socio-economic stratification, environmental vulnerabilities, and politico-institutional arrangements, followed by a review of national, regional and global policy frameworks. The education system is deeply aligned to Tongan cultural values, such as *faka'apa'apa* (respectful relationality) and *tauhi vā* (nurturing relational spaces), while also influenced by external policies, missionary legacies, regional cooperation, and global development agendas (Fa'avae et al, 2023; Thaman, 1997). Particular attention is directed to the tertiary sector, where Indigenous epistemologies, culturally oriented governance, and the dialogic and relational processes of *talanoa* intersect with transnational education policy regimes, producing complex negotiations over knowledge, authority, and relevance. Participants' narratives and collaborative sensemaking guide the analysis to generate key insights. Finally, it concludes with a consideration of the case study's broader implications, including structural challenges, emergent opportunities, and potential trajectories for future research.

The Contexts

The Kingdom of Tonga proudly distinguishes itself from other Pacific island nations as having avoided formal colonisation. Comprising 169 islands in total, 41 of which are inhabited, the country spans more than 800 km from north to south (see Figure 04 below). Tongatapu, the most populous island and the seat of government, is also home to the capital city of Nuku'alofa.

Figure 04.

Map of the Kingdom of Tonga.



Source: TSD, 2024a, p.17.

Demographic Contexts

Understanding contexts in Tonga requires an appreciation of the cultural values and social structures that shaped, and continue to shape, Tongan epistemologies and ontologies. Tonga is the only island nation in Moana Oceania to have retained its sovereignty throughout the colonial era (Campbell, 2015), and this history of self-determination informs both national identity and institutional development. The 'Tongan way', known as *anga fakatonga*, is both a characteristic of identity and an interwoven set of values that continue to influence educational priorities, leadership structures, and community engagement (Francis, 2006; Thaman, 2008). At the heart of *anga fakatonga* are *faka'apa'apa* (respect) and *tauhi vā* (nurturing relationships). Respect is demonstrated across social, familial, and institutional contexts, structuring interactions between elders and youth, leaders and community members, and teachers and students (Morton, 1996). *Tauhi vā* refers to the ongoing responsibility to maintain and care for relationships, not only

between people, but also with land, sea, and spiritual realms, reinforcing the holistic worldviews that underlie Tongan social life (Ka'ili, 2005).

Feveitokai'aki (reciprocity) is another cornerstone value that shapes collective responsibility and resource sharing (Thaman, 2008). This ethic supports community-based initiatives, including educational development projects, and fosters a collaborative approach to problem-solving. Closely linked is *loto to* (humility), which encourages selflessness and service for the collective good, a principle evident in the way many Tongan educators view their professional roles (Māhina, 2010).

Religion occupies a dominant position in Tongan society, with Christianity playing a formative role in daily life and national events (Campbell, 2011). Often, Tongans refer to their primary pillars as God first, then country. The integration of spiritual values into public institutions has implications for post-secondary education and training (PSET), where moral development is often viewed as inseparable from academic and technical training.

Social organisation in Tonga is hierarchical, with the monarchy at its apex, followed by the nobility and the commoner classes (Marcus, 1978). While contemporary governance and education systems have adapted, the influence of traditional leadership remains significant, particularly in decision-making processes and the setting of national priorities.

These cultural pillars (respect, relationship stewardship, reciprocity, humility, spirituality, and respect for hierarchical authority) collectively provide the socio-cultural context within which PSET policies and institutions have evolved. Any analysis of Tongan PSET must recognise the role of these values in shaping not only the governance and delivery of education, but also the expectations and aspirations of learners, families, and communities. Figure 05 below provides some key demographic data on the Kingdom of Tonga:

Figure 05.

Key Demographic Facts on the Kingdom of Tonga

- 104,175 total in 2024 (WB, 2025d), 48.7% male / 51.3% female (TSD, 2022)
- declining population (0.5% since 2016) (TSD, 2022)
- 21% of the population lives in the urban areas of Tongatapu (TSD, 2024a)
- median age: 22 (2021) (TSD, 2022)
- 35% under 15 years of age; 19% between 15 to 24 (TSD, 2024a)
- estimated that half of Tonga’s population lives abroad, mainly in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the United States (TSD, 2020)
- Net migration: -2,149 in 2024 (WB, 2025d)

Socio-Economic Contexts

The World Bank designated Tonga as an Upper Middle-Income Country (UMIC)³³(WB, 2025h) in FY25 (2024-2025). As discussed in the previous chapter on Samoa, while this designation is meant to “reflect a country’s level of development” (Metreau et al., 2024), it does not acknowledge the full realities and experiences of Tonga society, as the country’s sector-specific, relative poverty indicators are assessed at a higher margin with this designation.

According to an analysis of the 2021 Tonga Household Income and Expenditure Survey (TSD, 2022), there are distinct disparities, particularly between urban and rural households. Urban households in Nuku’alofa report higher monetary incomes than rural households, reflecting greater employment opportunities, commerce and remittances. In the lower wealth quintile, aggregate household incomes tend to be higher because more household members contribute to earnings or receive remittances, even when per-capita income remains comparatively low. Conversely, households in higher quintiles, though smaller, may exhibit higher per-person income despite lower total household income. These dynamics reflect Tonga’s broader economic context, in which remittances play a central role, formal employment is concentrated in urban areas, and extended household networks are integral to economic resilience. These contexts inform policy interventions aimed at equitable development, poverty alleviation, and strengthening rural livelihoods.

Within the most recently reported fiscal year (2023/24), Tonga’s GDP growth was estimated at 2.1%, following a rebound from the economic disruptions caused by the January 2022 Hunga Ha’apai volcanic eruption, tsunami, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The GDP for 2023 was

³³ For the 2026 fiscal year, upper middle-income economies (UMIC) are those with a GNI per capita between \$4,496USD and \$13,935USD. (WB, 2025h)

approximately TOP 1.3 billion (USD 509 million), with agriculture, fisheries, remittances, and aid inflows as the primary contributors (WB, 2024b).

Remittances remain the most significant external driver of household and national income. According to the World Bank's Migration and Development Brief (2023), personal remittances to Tonga were equivalent to 41% of GDP, the highest percentage in the Pacific and one of the highest proportions globally (WB, 2023b). Over 90% of Tongan households report receiving some form of remittance income (TSD, 2022), reflecting the *anga fakatonga* within the diaspora in supporting livelihoods, social obligations, and community resilience.

Employment in Tonga includes formal, informal, and subsistence activities, with the latter essential in rural and outer-island contexts for food security and cultural sustainability. According to the 2021 Household Income & Expenditure Survey (HIES), about 34% of employed Tongans were engaged in subsistence agriculture or fisheries (TSD, 2022). The unemployment rate in Tonga was estimated at 4.9% of the labour force in 2022 (WB, 2023b). However, underemployment and youth unemployment remain significantly higher. Youth unemployment (ages 15-24) was estimated at 17.9% in 2022, reflecting barriers to labour market entry (TSD, 2024b; WB, 2023b). Gender disparities are also evident, with young women experiencing consistently higher rates of joblessness than their male peers, compounded by limited access to formal sector opportunities and ongoing responsibilities in unpaid care and subsistence work (TSD, 2024b). Unemployment percentages, however, vary depending on the conceptual definition used. The Tonga Statistics Department, in its 2021 census analysis (TSD, 2024a), identified three variations and the respective statistics for each conceptualisation.

Tongan society also faces pressures from outward migration, as many young people seek seasonal employment opportunities in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia through labour mobility schemes. From the 2020-2021 period until 2024-2025, the percentage increased from approximately 2% to 8% of the total population participating in the primary labour mobility schemes (Redden et al., 2023). For those participating, the fourth highest reason provided was to pay for school tuition (1118 respondents), with the top reasons being: #1 provide for family's daily needs (2651), #2 build/renovate home (1231), and #3 purchase vehicle(s) (1172) (TSD, 2022, p.314). These schemes contribute to the decimation of a productive population, particularly in the rural areas and outer islands (MEC, 2020). Beginning in the 2022-2023 season of the Recognised Seasonal Employee (RSE) scheme, the cap was significantly increased and has continued to increase in subsequent years, thereby creating greater potential for outward labour mobility. Although this increases the trends of negative net migration, it

also sustains the vital flow of remittances that underpin both household resilience and national economic development.

Environmental Contexts

Tonga's environmental contexts are marked by high vulnerability to climate change and natural hazards, including cyclones, sea-level rise, volcanic activity, and earthquakes, which profoundly shape its social and economic development (Campbell & Barnett, 2010). As a low-lying archipelago with limited land resources, Tonga faces acute pressures on agriculture, fisheries, and infrastructure, intensifying the need for resilient livelihoods and adaptive skills. These environmental realities have direct implications for the PSET sub-sector, which is increasingly tasked with equipping Tongans with technical, vocational, and professional knowledge and skills for climate adaptation, disaster risk management and sustainable resource use. Consequently, environmental vulnerabilities not only frame Tonga's national development priorities but also situate PSET at the nexus where global sustainability imperatives intersect with local resilience-building (GoT, 2015).

Political-Institutional Contexts

Tonga presents a distinctive case within Moana Oceania as the only island nation in the region to have never been formally colonised. This fact has profoundly influenced its political and institutional development. Contemporary governance is deeply rooted in traditional authority, cultural hierarchies, and the enduring role of the monarchy. The *Tu'i Tonga* lineage, established around the 10th century, institutionalised a chiefly system that continues to shape social and political life, including the regulation of land tenure and community leadership (Campbell, 2001). The 1875 Constitution under King George Tupou I formalised these hierarchies while blending them with Western governmental frameworks, creating one of the oldest continuously operating constitutions in the world (Powles, 2009).

Religion has been equally formative. The 19th century saw the monarchy align with Methodist Christianity and the centralisation of power (Latukeyu, 1967). Today, Christianity remains hegemonic, with churches wielding significant influence over social norms and resource distribution. This moral authority extends into the education sector. Church schools and theological institutions dominate the educational system, and Christian values inform both the curriculum and institutional governance (Lawson, 2009; Taufe'ulungaki, 2002).

Externally, Tonga's position as a member of the Commonwealth and participant in regional and international fora underscores its engagement with global political institutions, without the direct colonial imposition experienced by its neighbouring countries. While Westminster-inspired reforms in 2010 increased elected representation in the Legislative Assembly, the monarchy and nobility retain considerable authority (Campbell, 2011). This balancing of traditional authority, Christian morals, and democratic reform reflects a broader institutional hybridity.

The persistence of chiefly authority and Christian influence often links educational priorities to moral formation and community service as much as to economic development. Tonga's sovereignty and its recent liberalising reforms have shaped how international aid and donor-driven education policies are negotiated. Unlike some neighbouring states, Tonga has maintained a relatively centralised role for government and the church in regulating PSET, even while engaging with regional frameworks such as the Pacific Qualifications Framework (UNESCO, 2015c). The result is a sub-sector where institutional autonomy, curricular priorities, and qualifications recognition remain entangled with Tonga's distinctive historical trajectory, rooted in monarchy, Christianity, and cultural identity, but increasingly responsive to regional and global pressures.

Education Sector Contexts

Education in Tonga reflects a unique interplay between deep historical roots, strong community-based traditions, and contemporary pressures from globalisation and development. Education has been a central institution shaping Tongan society, serving both as a vehicle for cultural and religious transmission and as a site of external influence. Understanding its historical foundations, governance, financing, and current challenges provides an important backdrop for considering the role of the National University of Tonga.

Formal western-style education in Tonga was introduced on 17 March 1828 by missionaries, marking the beginning of structured schooling distinct from Indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions (Campbell, 1992). The missionary legacy continues to shape the educational landscape, particularly through the dominance of church-affiliated schools, which remain central providers of education across the Kingdom (Thaman, 2020).

Recent census data illustrate both achievements and ongoing challenges to educational participation and attainment. According to the 2021 Census, 71% of Tongans reported secondary education as their highest level of attainment, 7.8% vocational and technical education and training (TVET), and 16.7% tertiary education (18.9% females compared to 14.2% of males) (TSD, 2022). Among school-aged children (6-15 years old), school enrolment is almost universal at 98%. However, progression and completion remain significant issues. While approximately two-thirds of Tongans have participated in secondary education, only 7% graduate with a secondary qualification, and just 8% achieve a tertiary qualification (TSD, 2024a). However, Tonga is also often said to have the highest number of PhD holders per capita in the Pacific, though this claim has not been systematically verified.

Education sector governance is anchored by the Education Act of 2013, which extended compulsory education to all youth aged 4 to 18. The Ministry of Education and Training (MET) is the lead government agency, responsible for policy development, regulation, and service delivery. The MET has expanded programmes targeting equity and retention, such as the *Polokalama Ako Tu'uloa* (Pathway Programme) for school dropouts, the Truancy, Reconciliation and Enforcement Unit, and collaborations with development partners such as the World Bank's Skills and Employment for Tongans (SET) Project (UNESCO, 2021b; WB, 2025e).

Education funding in Tonga is drawn from diverse sources. Both government and non-government systems receive allocations from the national budget, which are supplemented by external donor aid (MET, 2019). Non-government providers, largely church-affiliated, rely on support from their own global structures, alums, local communities and individual donors. The Tongan diaspora also plays a significant role in education funding through remittances to families to support education and through direct contributions to institutions (Addo, 2009).

External agencies have always been key stakeholders in the development of education in Tonga. From the early missionaries to aid-driven reforms, foreign governments, multilateral agencies and regional organisations have contributed to capacity-building, teacher training, curriculum reform and scholarship schemes (Crocombe, 1987; WB, 2021). These relationships, while often framed as partnerships, have also raised critical questions about dependency and alignment with local priorities.

Despite high enrolment rates, disparities persist in access and outcomes. Access to digital infrastructure is increasingly relevant and an essential tool for education. Nationwide, only 33.8% of households reported internet access in 2021, reflecting persistent digital inequity that shapes who has access to opportunities for e-learning and global knowledge networks and who does not (TSD, 2022).

With slightly higher participation by women in tertiary education (18.9%) compared to men (14.2%), these variations indicate both opportunities and obstacles. Geographic inequalities are also significant. Students from the outer islands face disproportionate challenges due to transport, costs and limited infrastructure (Taufe'ulungaki, 2002). Inclusive education remains underdeveloped, particularly in addressing the needs of children with disabilities, despite recent policy commitments to inclusive education (TSD, 2018).

Post-School Education & Training (PSET) in Tonga

The evolution of Tonga's PSET sector has unfolded through several key phases (see Figure 06), shaped by national priorities, regional dynamics, and global imperatives.

Development of PSET in Tonga

Planning & Policy Formations (1971-1980)

This period marked the initial policy and legislative groundwork for Tonga's PSET sub-sector. The Second Development Plan (1971-1975), underpinned by the Education Act (1974), provided an early framework for expanding post-school learning opportunities. The Potter Report (1975) offered recommendations to strengthen local education systems, focusing on reducing reliance on overseas institutions. This momentum continued under the Third Development Plan (1976-1980), with the second Potter Report (1977) and the Sitani Afeaki Report (1979) further reinforcing the national imperative to establish formal structures for post-school education and training. These studies collectively highlighted the need for locally relevant qualifications, institutional capacity building, and a more coordinated approach to workforce development (MET, 2020).

Institutional Emergence & Growth (1984-1986)

From the mid-1980s, Tonga moved decisively from planning to establishing PSET institutions. In 1984, a planning team presented an institutional proposal to the then Minister of Education,

Dr Langi Kavaliku, which was approved on 30 January 1985. This led to the creation of the Community Development and Training Centre (CDTC), which soon expanded with Australian funding to create the Royal Tonga Community College. Initially comprising six academic divisions, this institution later evolved into the Polytechnic Institution, which was later renamed the Tonga Maritime Polytechnical Institute (TMPI) after securing German government support. TMPI eventually became the Tonga Institute of Science and Technology (TIST). In 1986, the Tonga Teachers Training College began offering diploma programmes for both primary and secondary teams (MET, 2020).

Quality Assurance & Regulatory Frameworks (1987-2009)

The next phase of PSET development focused on regulation and quality assurance. Assessment systems were restructured in 1987, with the Tonga School Certificate replacing the New Zealand School Certificate, and in 1988, the Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate (PSSC) was introduced. By the mid-1990s, the sector offered postgraduate study options, including a Master's degree in Education by distance learning (1995) and postgraduate diplomas for teachers (1999). In 2002, the Tonga Institute of Higher Education (TIHE) was established and began to consolidate academic programmes from the CDTC and other providers (MET, 2020).

The Tonga National Qualifications & Accreditation Board (TNQAB) Act was passed in 2004, creating a statutory basis for monitoring standards and ensuring consistency across providers. In 2009, the TNQAB was formally established, marking the operationalisation of this framework. That same year, at the request of the Tongan King and facilitated by Ana Taufe'ulungaki, the University of the South Pacific's Institute of Education relocated to Tonga, reinforcing the country's role within regional education networks and expanding opportunities for domestic teacher training and professional development (MET, 2020).

Legislative Reform & Programme Diversification (2010-2017)

Tonga advanced reforms that deepened the legislative framework for PSET and broadened the scope of available programmes. The introduction of PSET regulations in 2010 strengthened quality assurance. In 2011, the University Committee appointed by the late Majesty King George Tupou V completed the first draft plans for a National University. A certificate of teaching for untrained teachers was introduced in 2012, improving entry pathways into the profession. The Education Act of 2013, which came into force in 2014, consolidated governance in the education sector. In 2017, Tonga introduced its first Early Childhood

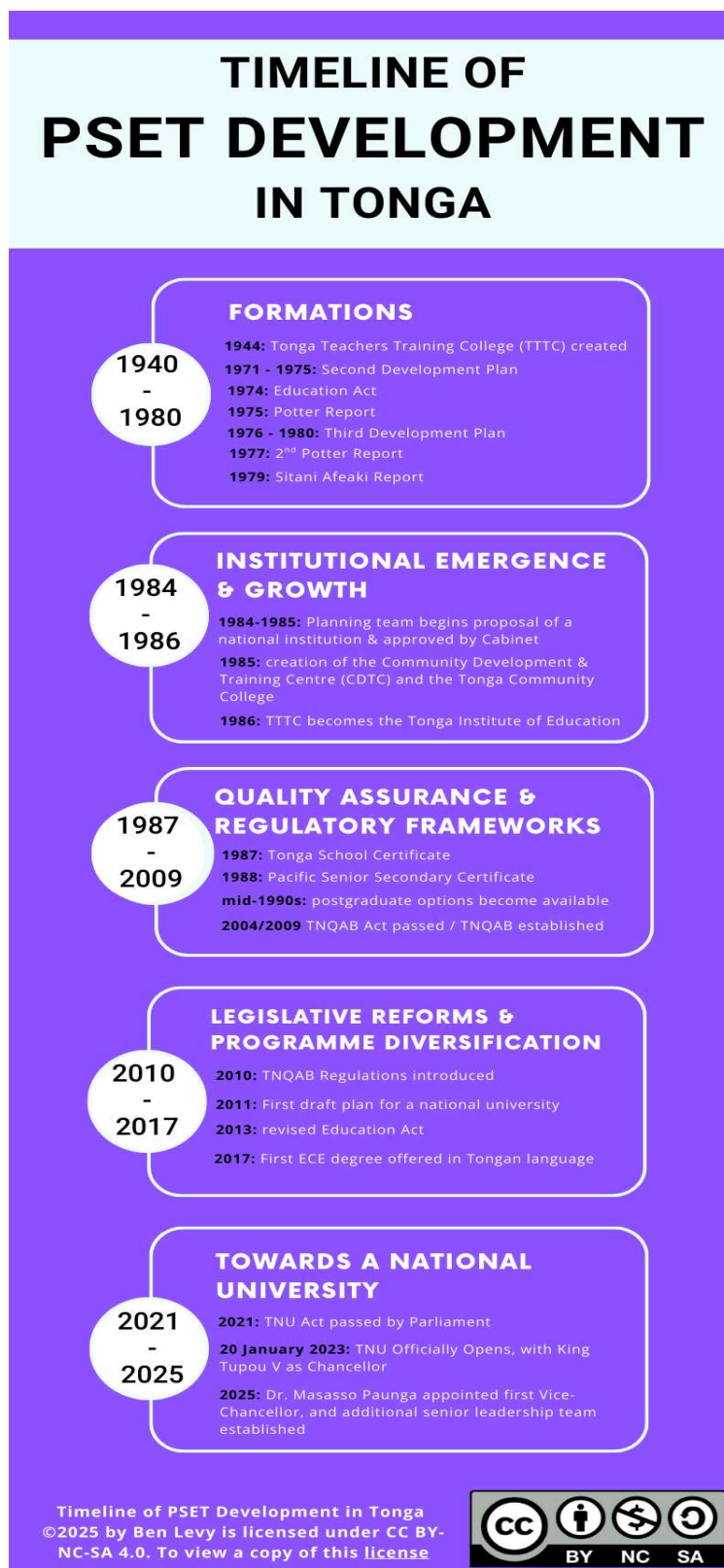
Education (ECE) degree delivered in the Tongan language, marking a commitment to culturally relevant education (MET, 2020).

Toward a National University (2021-2025)

The vision for a unified national institution was finally realised in 2021 when an Act of Parliament formally established the Tonga National University (TNU). This legislation intended to merge six government-owned institutions: the Tonga Institute of Education, Tonga Institute of Higher Education, Tonga Institute of Science and Technology, Tonga Maritime Polytechnic Institute, Queen Salote Institute of Nursing and Allied Health, and the Tonga Police College. TNU officially opened on 20 January 2023 with King Tupou VI as Chancellor and began enrolling students shortly thereafter. The university now comprises five faculties offering more than 50 programmes, from certificates through diplomas to degrees, across academic, technical and vocational fields. In February 2025, Dr Masasso Paunga was appointed Vice-Chancellor, signalling a period of leadership stabilisation and further strategic growth.

Figure 06.

PSET Development Timeline of Tonga.



Overview of PSET in Tonga

Tonga's PSET is delivered through a mix of public and private providers, and is quality assured by the Tonga National Qualifications and Accreditation Board (TNQAB). The TNQAB Act (2016) established TNQAB as the national quality assurance body, responsible for registering providers, accrediting programmes, and managing the Tonga Qualifications Framework (TQF). This ensures consistency in standards across what they refer to as post-compulsory education and training (PCET). TNQAB's public registry (*as of 21 Aug 2025*) lists 13 registered PSET providers, as follows:

- 'Ahopanilolo Technical Institute (ATI)
- Hango Agricultural College (HAC)
- Montfort Technical Institute (MTI)
- Tupou Tertiary Institute
- Pouno Campus of Tupou Tertiary Institute
- St. Joseph's Business College (St. JBC)
- Tonga Police College
- Lavengamlie Institute of Technology (LIT)
- University of the South Pacific (USP)
- Christ's University of the South Pacific (CUP)
- Toloa Technical and Vocational Education and Training (Toloa TVET)
- Palu Aviation Service - School of Aviation
- Tonga National University (TNU)

In 2021, Parliament passed the Tonga National University Act, which merged the government's PSET institutions into Tonga National University (TNU) (GoT, 2021). During this consolidation, some institutions (e.g., Tonga Police College) remain independently registered, as shown above, until the merger is finalised. In February 2025, the Tonga National University received full registration status from TNQAB and is now included in the registry (Talanoa, 2025). It is expected that TNU's qualifications will now be evaluated for accreditation, and the consolidation is now positioned for full implementation. Additionally, as shown in the list above, Tonga also hosts the campuses of the University of the South Pacific and the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC), as well as various private PSET institutions (TNQAB,

2025a). For example, the ‘Atenisi Institute, a self-proclaimed institute “for critical education in the South Pacific”, was established in 1975 and, after a six-year hiatus, has been reactivated in late 2025 (‘Atenisi Institute, 2025).

Capacity development for PSET educators has grown through collaborations with APTC and other providers. For example, between 2016 and 2018, Tongans began participating in the International Skills Training (IST) and the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, improving competency-based training and assessment (Simmons et al., 2018). TNU’s Faculty of Education also supports teacher preparation and professional learning for educators across the system (APTC, 2023a).

Participation in tertiary education in Tonga has expanded steadily. Unfortunately, PSET statistics are currently quite limited. The gross tertiary enrolment ratio³⁴ reached 51% in 2023 (63.5% female; 37.9% male) (UNESCO, 2025a). Within TVET, demand is increasing. In early 2025, 117 Tongans graduated with APTC qualifications, with women comprising more than half of the graduating cohort (APTC, 2025). Gender equity is also visible in pathway programmes. For example, 89% of female participants of the SET project successfully transitioned into the next level of PSET qualification (World Bank, 2025e).

Pathways to PSET

The transition into PSET in Tonga is shaped by a combination of schooling outcomes, the availability and status of TVET pathways (MET, 2022), and the opportunities afforded through various scholarship schemes. These factors collectively structure who gains access to higher education, where they study, and how these trajectories align with national, regional and international priorities.

The transition from secondary schooling to PSET is a critical juncture. While participation in lower secondary schooling remains relatively high, with completion rates of around 92%, there is a steep decline at the upper secondary level, where only about half of the students complete their studies (TSD, 2023). Gendered patterns are particularly striking, with girls outperforming boys in both attendance and completion. Girls’ completion rates at the upper secondary level

³⁴ Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio = “Gross enrolment ratio for tertiary school is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in tertiary education regardless of age by the population of the age group which officially corresponds to tertiary education and multiplying by 100.” ([WB DataBank Glossary](#))

are approximately 11 points higher than boys, and the disparity is pronounced among students from higher wealth quintiles, where the gap widens to 23 points in favour of girls (TSD, 2023).

These differences are further marked by geography. In rural areas, boys are significantly less likely than girls to be enrolled in upper secondary school at age-appropriate levels, with a 27 percentage-point gap (TSD, 2023). By contrast, urban boys show a modest attendance advantage over urban girls, though this is an exception to the overall trend. Such disparities highlight the complex intersections of gender, location, and socio-economic status in shaping pathways to PSET. In practice, the comparatively low completion rates at the upper secondary level, coupled with uneven patterns of access, restrict the pool of students eligible to enter PSET programmes directly.

TVET constitutes an important pathway for those who do not pursue or complete upper secondary schooling. In Tonga, TVET provision is delivered through both government and non-government institutions, including church-affiliated providers, and encompasses training in trades, business, and community-focused skills. These programmes serve multiple functions. They provide second-chance opportunities for students who leave school early, offer practical skills development for labour market participation, and increasingly create articulated pathways into further PSET study (MET, 2022).

TVET is guided by the TVET Policy Framework (2019) and coordinated through the TVET Coordination Unit within the Ministry of Education and Training (MET), established in 2022 (MET, 2022). Policy directions also emphasise skills for labour mobility, notably through the Labour Mobility Policy (2020) and the Labour Mobility Supply Management Strategy (2023), which balance Tonga's domestic skills needs with opportunities in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Development partners such as the World Bank and APTC support initiatives like the Skills and Employment for Tongans (SET) Project, which aims to improve access to quality TVET and employment outcomes (APTC, 2023a; Redden et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2025b; WB, 2025e).

TNU offers a wide range of programmes across education, business, trades, ICT, health, maritime, and agriculture. Within technical trades, offerings include automotive, electrical, plumbing, and construction. TNQAB has also registered new national qualifications in areas such as Work Readiness (TQF Levels 2 & 3) and Aged Care (TQF Level 2), alongside sector-specific qualifications like Whale Guiding (TQF Level 4) (TNQAB, 2025b). Partnerships with

APTC have introduced innovative micro-qualifications in programmes for women in construction and plumbing (APTC, 2023a).

TVET pathways, however, remain constrained by status and resource issues. Universities are often perceived as the ‘preferred’ route, particularly for families aspiring to overseas scholarships and professional careers, whereas TVET is frequently regarded as a ‘fallback’ option. This perception, combined with limited infrastructure and uneven quality assurance mechanisms, can limit TVET’s effectiveness as a robust pathway into higher levels of PSET. In the context of Tonga’s labour market and the desire for regionally mobile skills, TVET is an essential component of the broader PSET landscape and national development, providing opportunities for both domestic and regional employment (MET, 2022).

Scholarships are central to structuring pathways into PSET. Domestically, the Tongan government provides a limited number of scholarships that enable students to pursue PSET study within Tonga. More significantly, international scholarships funded through development partners and foreign governments facilitate access to higher education overseas. These scholarships not only expand access but shape the aspirations and choices for Tongan students. The potential to receive a scholarship to fund an overseas qualification is a further incentive for students to complete secondary schooling. Unfortunately, scholarships are often stratified by socio-economic status, gender, and school location, thereby reflecting inequities within these schemes. The reliance on external scholarships also raises questions of sustainability and alignment with national priorities, as students’ chosen academic programmes and future careers may be influenced by external agendas rather than Tonga’s development priorities. These pathways illustrate the complex, intersecting factors that affect access to PSET in Tonga. Secondary school outcomes set the initial parameters; TVET provides both alternative and complementary paths (MET, 2022); and scholarships are instrumental in determining who continues their studies, where, and in what disciplines.

PSET Completions

Data on PSET completions in Tonga is limited and fragmented, making it challenging to construct a comprehensive analysis of graduate outcomes. Available statistics from the national government (e.g. TSD, MET) and regional organisations (e.g. SPC) primarily capture enrolment/participation trends rather than completion rates. Anecdotal evidence and institutional reports suggest that completion rates vary considerably across providers and fields

of study, with higher attrition observed in programmes requiring sustained academic preparation (WB, 2017). For students studying overseas on scholarships, completion outcomes are influenced not only by academic readiness but also by adjustment challenges, financial pressures, and scholarship award requirements. While many students complete and return to Tonga, often their progression is delayed, and non-completion remains a significant concern for development partners and the government of Tonga.

Prior to moving to the next section, I would like to include a special acknowledgment of the late **Dr Ana Taufe'ulungaki**, who has been a key leader in Tonga's educational development, including the PSET sector, and facilitated the Scoping Report (MET, 2020) that created the necessary catalysts for the realisation of the Tonga National University.

Tonga National University

The establishment of the Tonga National University (TNU) represented a significant milestone in the country's ongoing project of self-determination in education. The creation of a national university reflected the nation's ambition to consolidate its PSET system under a unified framework (Campbell, 2011; Taufe'ulungaki, 2002). Early efforts at higher education were fragmented across specialised institutes, yet the rationale for a single, national university was long recognised. The goal has always been to align educational provision with Tonga's national priorities, while grounding teaching, learning and research in cultural values and ethical principles. As the Ministry of Education and Training (MET) framed it, the institution must rest on Tonga's "twin heritage, God and Tonga" and be guided by foresight and spiritual purpose, thereby embodying a legacy for future generations (MET, 2020, p.2). This journey has progressed from fragmented initiatives to a unified institution with the capacity and the commitment to nurture Tonga's human capital in ways that are both ethically grounded and culturally resonant.

The vision was formalised through the 2020 Scoping Study, which combined literature review, focus groups, and interviews to assess public sentiment and policy feasibility. The study demonstrated strong support for a national university and culminated in 23 recommendations submitted to the Cabinet, which formally endorsed the project in October



2020 (MET, 2020). Legislative action followed swiftly. The Tonga National University Act was passed by Parliament in August 2021 and received Royal Assent in May 2022, establishing TNU with His Majesty King Tupou VI as Chancellor. Under the Act, TNU merged six government-run higher education institutions into a single institution:

- the Tonga Institute of Education;
- Tonga Institute for Higher Education;
- Tonga Institute of Science and Technology;
- Tonga Maritime Polytechnic Institute;
- Queen Salote Institute of Nursing and Allied Health; and,
- Tonga Police College.

This integration aimed to streamline governance, reduce duplication, and foster synergy across academic, technical, and vocational training pathways (GOT, 2021). TNU is mandated to provide qualifications from certificate to doctoral levels, while embedding Tongan language, culture, and values into its programmes. Illustrative examples of how this is realised in practice are explored later in this chapter. Objectives include extending knowledge through teaching and research, promoting bilingual education (Tongan and English), advancing climate resilience and sustainable resource use, and supporting Tonga's broader social and economic development. Currently, TNU has five faculties:

- Faculty of Education, Arts and Humanities
- Faculty of Science and Technology
- Faculty of Nursing and Health Science
- Faculty of Business and Public Administration
- National Centre for Climate Change and Energy

In essence, the formation of TNU is not simply an institutional reform, but an expression of Tonga's sovereignty and development priorities. By positioning itself as a guardian of Tongan identity and a driver of Indigenous innovation, TNU exemplifies how higher education in Moana Oceania is shaped by tradition, modernity, and the region's challenges in a globalised world (Lawson, 2009; UNESCO, 2015c).

National Priorities

Applying the critical policy analysis (CPA) framework introduced in Chapter 3, this section will analyse the positioning of the Tonga National University within Tonga's broader development agenda, as reflected in national development plans, education sector strategies, and PSET policies. Tonga's national development priorities are set out in the Tonga Strategic Development Framework II (TSDF II) 2015-2025, which articulates a long-term vision of "a more progressive Tonga supporting a higher quality for all" (GoT, 2015, p.17). The framework is structured around seven National Outcomes, including human development, sustainable and inclusive economic growth, good governance, climate resilience, and infrastructure development. These outcomes provide the overarching framework for all ministries, sectors, and institutions, including tertiary education providers.

The Tonga Education Strategic Policy Framework (TESPF) 2025-2035 serves to implement the Tonga Strategic Development Framework II (TSDF II) across the entire education system, from early childhood to higher education. This framework assigns the education sector the critical role of translating broad National Outcomes, specifically the goal of "more inclusive, sustainable, and empowering human development and gender equality" (p. 4), into tangible progress in human development, skills formation, and social cohesion. Adopting a sector-wide perspective, the TESPf recognises tertiary institutions as essential players in promoting lifelong learning, building resilience, and generating the knowledge needed to achieve Tonga's development priorities (MET, 2025).

Of particular relevance to Tonga National University are National Outcomes A (dynamic knowledge-based economy) and C (human development with gender equality), which prioritise equitable access to quality education and skills development for all Tongans. The TSDF II recognises education and training as critical to increase pathways to domestic and international labour markets and to strengthening livelihoods for all Tongans. According to the TSDF II, between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses, TVET participation increased only from 8.1% to 9.6%, while tertiary participation increased from 2.7% to 16.1%, demonstrating the potential for greater access, scalability, and additional opportunities (GoT, 2015). The TSDF II integrates these development goals with the Kingdom's national motto, "God and Tonga are our inheritance" (p. 6). This grounding emphasises that educational expansion and economic diversification must be rooted in Tongan culture, values, and collective well-being. Consequently, the framework mandates preserving the positive aspects of Tongan identity

while simultaneously reforming institutional practices. This dual focus is crucial for understanding the mandate of the Tonga National University (TNU) to serve as both a driver of development and a protector of *anga fakatonga* (the Tongan way) within an increasingly globalised, knowledge-based economy (GoT, 2015).

The Education Policy Framework (EPF) 2020-2030 further positioned tertiary education as central to national development, with the objective of “produce a highly skilled, adaptable and innovative workforce to drive Tonga’s sustainable development” (MET, 2020, p. 7). Within this policy framework, TNU is identified as the primary vehicle for delivering nationally relevant higher education and TVET, ensuring coherence across previously fragmented tertiary providers. Building on the foundation of the previous framework, the Tonga Education Strategic Policy Framework (TESPF) 2025-2035 sets forth a unified vision for the entire education sector, encompassing early childhood, schooling, TVET, and higher education. This coherent sector is rooted in Christian faith, Tongan cultural values, and the philosophy of *tangata kakato* (the complete person). The TESPf is strategically aligned with the Tonga Strategic Development Framework II (TSDF II), the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Significantly, the framework identifies the establishment of the Tonga National University (TNU) as a key government priority to advance an inclusive, sustainable, and empowering human development (MET, 2025). Both the earlier Education Policy Framework (EPF) and the TESPf position the TNU as a critical mechanism not only for consolidating Post-Secondary Education and Training (PSET) but also as central to achieving Tonga’s long-term national development objectives.

As previously discussed, a distinctive element of TNU’s role is the safeguarding of Tongan culture, language and knowledge systems. The TSDF II emphasises that Tonga’s development must remain rooted in *anga fakatonga* (as seen in Figure 07), recognising culture as both a strength and a source of resilience within public service leadership principles (GoT, 2015). TNU contributes to this mandate by embedding *lea faka-Tonga* (history) and cultural knowledge into its programmes, while also supporting research and scholarship on Tonga’s heritage. One example of this is the Bachelor of Education in Tongan Early Childhood Education (ECE), which has been designed “...with specific intention for ECE in Tonga that is born out of Tonga, its people, its unique sets of knowledge and skills, values and beliefs, epistemologies and tailored specifically for Tongans in Tonga and to be delivered in the Tongan language” (TNU, 2025). TNU has positioned itself not only as a skills provider but also as a

site of knowledge production, transmission, and safeguarding, ensuring the continuity of Tongan identity in an era of globalisation.

Figure 07.

Leadership Code for the Tonga Public Service

Box 2: Leadership Code
• <i>Mo'ui faka-e-'Otua</i> (Live a Godly life)
• <i>'Ofa</i> (Love)
• <i>Faitotonu</i> (Honesty)
• <i>Faka'apa'apa</i> (Respect)
• <i>Mamahi'i me'a</i> (Commitment/Loyalty)
• <i>Tauhi Vaha'a</i> (Reciprocal relationship)
• <i>Vahevahe tatau</i> (Equality)
• <i>Fa'a kataki</i> (Patience)
• <i>Tali ui</i> (Accountability)
• <i>'Ata ki tu'a</i> (Transparency)
• <i>Falala'anga</i> (Trustworthiness)
• <i>Mo'ui visone</i> (Visionary)
• <i>Lototoo</i> (Humility)
• <i>Mo'ui lelei faka-e-sino</i> (Healthy)

Source: GoT, 2015, p.42

Unlike the other four case studies, Tonga National University does not yet have a publicly available institutional strategic plan. The alignment analysis (see Table 7 below) therefore maps national development and education frameworks against TNU's legislated functions and founding mandate, rather than a formal corporate plan.

Table 07.

Mapping Alignment Between TSDF II, the Tonga Education Strategic Policy Framework and the Legislated Mandate of the Tonga National University.

TSDF II Priorities	TESPF 2025-2035	TNU Mandate
National Outcome A: dynamic knowledge-based economy	Policy Area 2: Education for resilience and sustainable	<i>TNU is mandated to provide qualifications from certificate to</i>

<i>Emphasises more substantial knowledge and service-based industries, application of new skills and technologies, and value-added production across sectors.</i>	development <i>Aims to re-engineer education so learners become tangata kakato (holistic individuals) with the skills to live in a changing world; it applies to all sub-sectors, including higher education.</i>	<i>doctoral levels across academic, technical and vocational fields; establish the National Centre for Climate Change and Energy; and advance climate resilience and sustainable resource use through teaching and research.</i>
National Outcome C: human development with gender equality <i>Calls for well-educated, skilled and healthy people, supported by “improved education and training providing life-time learning” and more appropriate social and cultural practices.</i>	Vision and Goals <i>“Excellence in education that is based on the motto ‘God and Tonga are our inheritance’ and is founded on our working together”; three goals of quality/relevance, equitable access, and shared governance.</i>	<i>TNU is framed by “twin heritage, God and Tonga”, embedding lea faka-Tonga, Tongan history and cultural knowledge across programmes; it is positioned as an expression of sovereignty and Indigenous innovation rather than merely an efficiency reform.</i>
TSDF II Organisational Outcome 2.4 <i>Improved education and training encourage lifelong learning of academic and vocational knowledge for all people.</i>	Policy Area 3: Equitable access and inclusive education <i>Aims to share educational opportunities fairly across islands and learners, including in higher education.</i>	<i>TNU’s role in consolidating previously fragmented PSET institutions into a unified national university, and in broadening the programme mix and pathways, including TVET, teacher education, nursing, and business, to expand domestic opportunities rather than relying solely on overseas scholarships.</i>
TSDF II National Outcome C and Organisational Outcome 4.5 <i>Improved use of research and development, focusing on priority needs.</i>	Policy Areas 4 & 5 <i>Partnerships, community connectedness, and governance/leadership, including establishing a National Research Council and depositing research into the Kuku Kaunaka Collection.</i>	<i>TNU is an emerging national research hub, working alongside the USP Tonga Campus and other actors, to extend knowledge through teaching and research in ways that respond to national priorities and support Indigenous knowledge production.</i>

Source: GoT, 2015; MET, 2020; MET, 2025

The TSDF II, EPF, and TESPf collectively establish TNU as Tonga's primary domestic vehicle for integrating national development goals with tertiary education, research agendas, and

lifelong learning opportunities. Consequently, the alignment presented in Table 7 should be viewed less as a reflection of TNU's current state and more as an illustration of the high expectations placed upon a new national university. As detailed in the following sections of this chapter, participants recognise both encouraging progress and substantial discrepancies between these formal policy alignments and the practical realities of institutional capacity, governance, and implementation.

Regionalism

Although TNU is a national university, it is embedded in the greater regional higher education ecosystem. Tonga is a signatory to the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) 2018-2030, which sets out the principles for quality, relevance, pathways, and teacher professionalism (PIFS, 2018). TNU, through collaboration with MET, contributes to PacREF initiatives, such as improving TVET alignment (MET, 2022), strengthening teacher education, and supporting student outcomes. The regional quality assurance systems, coordinated by SPC (e.g., EQAP and PQF), significantly influence TNU's operations. Participation in these systems places TNU's academic programme qualifications as regionally recognised, facilitating greater labour mobility regionally (SPC, 2011, 2015). This is particularly significant given Tonga's economic dependence on remittances through such labour mobility. At the same time, Tonga must navigate the risks of over-reliance on external models of quality and relevance that may not always align with Tongan cultural and social priorities.

Internationalisation

As with other nations in Moana Oceania, internationalisation has the potential to create both opportunities and challenges. Tonga's Education sector is shaped by global frameworks (e.g., SDG 4: Quality Education), which promote inclusive education and lifelong learning. The EPF 2020-2030 explicitly aligns with these global commitments, while acknowledging the resource constraints faced by higher education systems in the Global South (MET, 2020). Internationalisation at TNU primarily occurs through donor-funded projects, scholarships, and bilateral partnerships. Development partners to Tonga's education sector, including Australia (51%), the World Bank (30%), Aotearoa New Zealand (11%), and the United States (6%) in 2022, provided significant financial and technical support, including infrastructure, staff training, and programme development (Lowy Institute, 2024). While Tonga has yet to sign UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher

Education (UNESCO, 2023b), the Convention nonetheless influences national policy debates on qualifications' mobility and recognition. Global higher education ranking systems exert less direct influence on TNU than on larger universities. However, the pressure to demonstrate credibility through staff qualifications, research outputs, and programme diversity remains an important consideration for institutional strategy.

Collaborative Sensemaking: The Tongan Case Study

Consistent with the methodological commitments of *talanoa* outlined in Chapter 3, the collaborative sensemaking process in Tonga remained attentive to relational contexts, participants' meaning making, and the co-constructed interpretation (collaborative sensemaking). The analysis of the Tonga case study is presented through an integration of participants' narratives and collaborative sensemaking, aimed at addressing the research's central aims. The analysis sheds light on how national priorities are interpreted, enacted, and, at times, contested in Tonga, as well as on the role of the Tonga National University (TNU). The presentation of findings follows a thematic structure, with each theme offering a distinct perspective for engaging with participants' narratives and sensemaking. These themes, anchored in lived realities and reflective observations, reveal the complex interplay of sociocultural traditions, institutional structures, and broader contextual forces. In the Tonga case, the movement from dialogue with participations to collaborative interpretation remained shaped by the relational and ethical commitments of *talanoa* and the wider methodological framing of the study. Collaborative sensemaking involved remaining attentive to the social and cultural textures through which knowledge had been shared, so that analysis did not abstract participants' shared knowledge from the relationships, obligations, and contextual understandings that gave them force. After outlining each theme, the discussion synthesises cross-cutting insights to engage directly with the study's guiding questions.

The Voices / Narratives (Participants and Process)

In Tongan contexts, research ethics must be firmly grounded in the values of *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *fetokoni'aki* (reciprocity), and *tauhi vā* (nurturing relationality). Ethical practice surpasses formal consent alone but requires researchers to uphold *anga fakatonga* (Tongan ways of being) through genuine collaboration, reciprocity, and the safeguarding of Tongan knowledge, customs and collective wellbeing. Researchers are called to engage in ways that protect and honour the dignity of individuals, families and communities, ensuring that research

processes and outcomes strengthen cultural integrity, social harmony, and the interwoven relationships that sustain Tongan society (Māhina, 2004; Vaioleti, 2013).

For the Tonga case study, I engaged stakeholders from Tonga National University and key external institutions whose roles intersected with Tonga's PSET subsector. I was privileged to speak with participants from a variety of roles and institutions over a series of in-person *talanoa* sessions, totalling 586 minutes (9 hours, 46 minutes). In-person sessions were held in participants' offices, per their request. All in-person *talanoa* sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were subsequently provided to participants for the opportunity to review and validate their content, and ensure their intended responses were clear and accurate.

Upon completing the five case study fieldwork stages, I began the initial review of each country's narrative responses and identified preliminary themes. To best honour and (re)present participants' narratives, I asked them to continue engaging in collaborative sensemaking. Within each theme, I identified narrative passages that exemplified it. This preliminary analysis was then provided to the participants, with all narrative passages anonymised to protect confidentiality. Participants were asked to review and sensemake the research questions to identify and validate key findings and analyses. In the section below, the emergent themes that evolved from the collaborative sensemaking process are presented, along with participants' narrative contributions.

Emergent Themes

The following section presents emergent themes arising from *talanoa* conducted in Tonga, as a case study analysis of this research. These themes offer insights into how participants have observed and experienced the intersections of national, regional, and international priorities at Tonga National University (TNU). They reveal both the challenges and opportunities embedded at the nexus of these multi-scalar and cross-cultural contexts. At the national scale, we see higher education anchored in national development and *anga fakatonga*; at the regional scale, a regionalism seen as both an opportunity and an acceleration, yet also an asymmetry; and at the international scale, an internationalisation that is vastly inequitable across partnerships, standards, and knowledge systems. The following themes reflect the nuanced realities of working within and beyond Tonga's higher education landscape:

Centring National Priorities

- Founding Vision, Governance and National Identity of TNU

- Labour Markets, Brain Drain and National Development
- Education, Equity and Holistic Wellbeing

Impact of Regionalism

- Regional Standards, Teacher Professionalism and Accelerated Agendas
- Regionalism as Relational Safe Space
- Labour Mobility, Remittances and National Capacity

Impact of Internationalisation

- Partnerships, Consultants and Negotiating External Influence
- Epistemic Inequities and Knowledge Access
- Balancing Global Benchmarks and *Anga Fakatonga* in Programme Design

National Priorities, *Theme 1: Founding Vision, Governance and National Identity of TNU*

Participants described Tonga National University (TNU) as a long-awaited yet fundamentally incomplete national endeavour. The 2020 Scoping Study and related policy documents positioned TNU as a statement of national sovereignty, achieved by merging existing fragmented Post-Secondary Education and Training (PSET) institutions. Its mandate is to support Tonga’s development goals, explicitly founded on the nation's core principles: "twin heritage, God and Tonga" (MET, 2020, p. 2). However, when participants discussed how this initial vision translated into practice, their language often emphasised continuity rather than transformation. For several participants, the initial phase of TNU was perceived more as a simple relabelling of existing structures than as a genuine strategic re-foundation,

“We just take over the current tertiary institutes, and then move from there...business as usual, but with a different title.” (P5, University Employee)

This sense of “business as usual” (P3, Government Employee) was not only technical, but symbolic. Participants questioned whether the institutional reconfiguration had yet produced a coherent identity as a national university capable of presenting Tonga’s aspirations. One government participant shared bluntly,

“They might as well call themselves just a university. It’s not really up to the national level...No vision established to align with the nation.” (P3, government employee)

The disconnect between the robust normative goals embedded in legislation and strategy, such as national priorities, cultural safeguarding, and bilingual education, emphasised by the TNU Act and strategic planning, and the actual institutional development was evident in participant critiques. For instance, P4 (Government Employee) described TNU's nascent stage as "still at a baby stage and very highly politicised," noting that Ministers dominate the governing Council

and are susceptible to political interference. P6 (University Employee) provided further insight into these structural changes,

“...now that we are moving into a university space, there are a lot of changes. For us, we are trying to familiarise ourselves...there are certain ways of doing things that we were used to, and we have to actually unlearn and learn to be part of this unified organisation.”

The process of "unlearning and relearning" experienced by participants mirrors the wider institutional state of transition, or liminality, at TNU. Despite its official designation as a national university, many daily operational practices, reporting structures, and internal relationships remain tied to former institutional arrangements. Consequently, the challenge for some individuals extends beyond mere technical reorganisation; it involves fundamentally rethinking the identity of a university-based school while simultaneously respecting established connections with other government bodies.

However, not all reactions were adverse; some counter-voices viewed the creation of TNU favourably, interpreting it as "a clear next step" toward aligning tertiary education with national development and global citizenship, but specifically "through a Tongan lens" (P8, University Employee),

“It is a clear next step in terms of strategy that overarches the university...meeting national priorities...being a global citizen, but through a Tongan lens.” (P8, University Employee)

The distinct "Tongan lens" (P8, University Employee) was frequently expressed through references to *anga fakatonga* and the national motto. A participant underscored the importance of anchoring TNU's evolving identity in these fundamental principles.

“Our national motto is somewhat at the forefront of everything at TNU and any Tongan would consider it as defining their national identity.” (P9, University Employee)

Participants also pointed to concrete initiatives that could embody this identity, such as a proposed Centre of Tongan Language and Culture, and the development of policy frameworks (strategic plan, quality management system, faculty plans, etc.) that weave culture and national priorities into everyday institutional practice.

The narratives gathered indicate that Tonga National University (TNU) is currently in a transitional phase. It is intended to be a beacon of Tongan sovereignty and innovation, officially mandated to integrate Tongan language, values, and development priorities into its programmes. However, in practice, participants experienced an institution still struggling with fragmentation, politicisation, and legacy structures from its pre-university phase. In their view,

the core challenge is to move beyond the current "business as usual" approach. This requires a deliberate effort to cultivate a distinct institutional identity that is demonstrably national, accountable to key policy frameworks like TSDF II and the Education Policy Framework, and genuinely rooted in *anga fakatonga*, avoiding mere tokenism or subordination to political self-interest.

National Priorities, Theme 2: Labour Markets, Brain Drain and National Development

Participants viewed Tonga National University (TNU) as intrinsically connected to Tonga's labour market, specifically addressing both domestic workforce demands and the significant factor of outward migration through labour mobility schemes. While national policy, articulated in the Tonga Strategic Development Framework (TSDF-Outcome A) (GoT, 2015), positions education as key to fostering a dynamic, knowledge-based economy and broadening access to both local and international job markets, the reality on the ground is more precarious. Participants highlighted a landscape profoundly shaped by remittance-driven migration, high youth unemployment, and a scarcity of local opportunities, all of which directly influence students' decisions about enrolment and their ultimate expectations from higher education.

A TNU staff member explained that new programs are deliberately designed to reconcile local requirements with international market needs.

“For aged care...our School of Nursing is thinking of developing a programme... The graduates will match the demand locally, and the extras can apply for positions overseas.” (P5, University Employee)

This approach demonstrates a practical strategy in which TNU simultaneously serves both the domestic national service and an exportable labour force. Participants viewed alignment with international labour markets as almost inevitable, given Tonga's significant reliance on remittances, as discussed previously, and the rapid increase in participation in schemes such as RSE and PALM. However, there was a simultaneous concern about the adverse impact on the domestic productive population (MEC, 2020), particularly in rural areas and outer islands, as skilled workers depart for higher earnings overseas. P7 (University Employee), for instance, interpreted national priorities as, above all else, a commitment to maintaining the domestic workforce,

“For us, our priority has always been to meet the needs of Tonga first, to actually see that we provide the training to prepare the workforce, the local workforce...before we can actually cater for any other needs.”

The competing pressures of migration, parental aspirations, and decision-making, referred to by one University Employee (P7) as the "*push and pull of migration*", became evident during *talanoa* sessions and subsequent collaborative sensemaking regarding programme planning. For instance, a participant recalled instances where parents requested official documentation to allow their children to leave for seasonal employment, sometimes interrupting their studies before they had completed their qualifications.

"A lot of the parents...see public service as the only opportunity for work here and if you're not working, then they send the kids at a very young age to go off and get better money." (P4, Government Employee)

TNU is situated within a larger structure of limited opportunities, where the pursuit of higher education often clashes with the urgent need for immediate income. The university serves dual functions: both as a means to secure more stable employment and as a critical safety net. This safety net catches students who have been derailed from traditional schooling, such as those who are expelled, become pregnant, or fail to complete their diplomas, but who can still potentially achieve a certificate and "*graduate from a university*," according to one government employee (P4).

From a national priorities' perspective, participants identified at least three national priority dilemmas:

1. **Programme Relevance vs. Portability:** A challenge exists in designing locally relevant programmes (e.g., to health, trades, or education sectors) while simultaneously being portable enough to facilitate overseas employment.
2. **Short-term Remittances vs. Long-term Capacity:** There is a need to balance the immediate financial benefits of remittances with the risk of creating long-term capacity deficits in critical domestic services like teaching and nursing.
3. **Equity in Access and Opportunity:** Addressing equity in access to transnational skilled migration (TNU) across islands, genders, and socio-economic groups is crucial to prevent overseas opportunities from becoming the *only* viable pathway for 'improving' marginalised communities.

Participants during collaborative sensemaking proposed that TNU deliberately cultivate "*resilient global citizens*" (P4, Government Employee) through an outward-looking curriculum and focused short courses relevant to both domestic and international job markets. A key emphasis was that this preparation should not diminish graduates' commitment to Tonga.

Therefore, the goal transcends merely creating mobile workers; it involves educating graduates who are equipped to move, return, circulate, and contribute, both by supporting their families via remittances and by enriching the national workforce with contextually relevant skills.

National Priorities, *Theme 3: Education, Equity and Holistic Wellbeing*

Tongan participants understood education not merely as a route to credentials, but as a holistic, relational endeavour centred on equity, wellbeing, spiritual, and ethical development. While this resonates with policy discussions linking education to social cohesion and human development, the participants rooted these concepts in their concrete experiences in both outer and main island schools.

This commitment to equity was particularly evident in the accounts of educators, such as one who specifically chose to work in the outer islands,

“Every school requires the best education despite their situations, both the poor and the rich. Even the far and the main centre, they all aspire...They want to have the best regardless of their socioeconomic situation” (P8, University Employee).

Equity, in this context, is not merely theoretical; it is realised by guaranteeing that students in isolated or under-resourced locations receive the same high-quality teachers and learning environments as their peers. Participants connected this concept to their commitment as civil servants, noting that accepting personally challenging postings allowed them to deepen their comprehension of the varied realities faced by different student populations.

Equity was also discussed in relation to strong hierarchical models of governance, shaped by socio-cultural-political structures in Tonga, and emerged as a barrier to inclusive planning and innovation.

“It’s always top-down...there’s little two-way discussion.” (P4, Government Employee)

Younger, reform-minded professionals face marginalisation despite possessing international training, pointing to intergenerational tensions between established cultural norms and emerging epistemologies and ontologies.

The emotional and often unacknowledged nature of their relational work was a key theme in teacher narratives, as illustrated by one participant's reflection,

“Teachers do more sometimes our bodies can handle...what you have seen in the school as problem students is just a part of the problem...only the one who can reach out...will really touch...and when they go, they’ll always remember” (P8, University Employee).

This highlights a profoundly relational pedagogy. Teachers are seen as "walking with" students, focused on the individual and complex realities of their lives, and confident that this inherent

care will leave a lasting mark, even if standard assessments fail to quantify it. A persistent concern among participants was that accountability frameworks and assessment methods seldom acknowledge this vital, yet energy-intensive, relational and pastoral aspect of teaching. References to "*health-promoting schools*" (P6/P7, University Employees) and cross-sector initiatives integrating education with health, disaster risk reduction, and community resilience also highlighted the concept of holistic wellbeing. These initiatives demonstrated to participants that education policy is intrinsically linked to broader wellbeing agendas. Moreover, schools emerge as vital settings where health behaviours, climate awareness, and civic responsibility are nurtured through inter-sectoral collaborations.

The perceived role of The National University (TNU) is multifaceted. Beyond its function as a national teacher education provider, tasked with preparing educators capable of working across the full spectrum of student contexts, from urban Nuku'alofa to remote islands (P8, University Employee), TNU is also framed as an agent of equity and holistic transformation.

As a university, it is expected to broaden access to its programmes (e.g., School of Education pathways aim to offer an enrolment opportunity to "*almost everyone applying*"), and to integrate community engagement that links student learning to social and environmental well-being (P9, University Employee).

Participants' narratives, therefore, position TNU not only as a producer of a workforce but also as an institution with key social responsibilities. These responsibilities include addressing geographic and socio-economic disparities, valuing and sustaining teachers' relational labour, and designing programmes that embed education within broader notions of well-being. Consequently, TNU's contribution to national priorities is measured by the transformation of lives and relationships, just as much as by formal metrics such as enrolment, completion, and employment rates.

Regionalism, Theme 1: Regional Standards, Teacher Professionalism and Accelerated Agendas

TNU's role was viewed by participants within a comprehensive regional structure of standards and frameworks, most notably PacREF, alongside related quality assurance and teacher professionalism initiatives. Regional involvement was perceived as both a benefit and a challenge.

While regional collaboration was valued for promoting shared knowledge and offering technical assistance, it was also a source of pressure. For instance, one participant highlighted

how regional partnerships enhanced the national effort in developing the Tonga Teachers' Professional Standards,

“Regionalism in my view helps in achieving some of our national priorities...Regional consultants came to assist the team in the development of the Standards...Regionalism promotes unity and closer ties amongst member countries. Good learning opportunities for representatives attending regional meetings” (P9, University Employee).

Regionalism offers Tonga crucial moral, educational, and financial support, alongside a mechanism for pooling expertise and expediting essential reforms. Furthermore, engaging in regional quality assurance systems and the Pacific Qualifications Framework significantly boosts the recognition of Tongan qualifications throughout the Pacific. This enhanced recognition, in turn, has positive implications for both the mobility and employability of Tongan citizens.

Participants also raised concerns about the speed and focus of regional initiatives. For instance, one participant noted that regionalism often appears to be *"initiated from regional agencies instead of the countries like ours"* (P9, University Employee), suggesting the process is primarily dictated by donor timelines and expectations,

“Regionalism at most times tends to push their agendas very early...Countries like Tonga may not be ready to accept those ideas and practices brought and introduced by regional agencies...We do not need to accept every ‘ball’ passed on to us” (P9, University Employee).

The metaphor of *"not accepting every ball"* reflects a desire for increased national autonomy in choosing which regional initiatives to adopt, and how and when to integrate them. Participants emphasised the necessity of pausing for reflection, contextual consideration, and spiritual discernment before deciding on the implementation of regional standards within Tonga's education system.

For the Tonga National University (TNU), this dynamic presents both potential advantages and challenges. While regional standards can contribute to teacher professionalisation and enhance the credibility of TNU's academic offerings, they may also introduce expectations and models that conflict with Tongan realities. Furthermore, they can impose compliance burdens that strain the university's already limited institutional capacity. Consequently, participants advocated for a more *"dialogic regionalism,"* positioning TNU and other national actors as active co-shapers of regionally defined agendas, rather than just passive implementers.

Regionalism, Theme 2: Regionalism as a Relational Safe Space

Participants emphasised that regional spaces hold relational significance, going beyond established frameworks and standards. For one participant, a University Employee (P9), these sites where shared Moana Oceania experiences converge are considered,

“On the regional level, there’s a bit more of a safe space to contribute and collaborate amongst colleagues because there’s some general understanding of that context” (P9, University Employee).

Regional forums, workshops, and networks were highly valued by Tongan educators and policymakers, who saw them as crucial spaces for *talanoa*. In these settings, they could discuss their shared experiences of island contexts, resource limitations, and the difficulties of integrating Indigenous values with internationally imported educational models, a contrast to global forums where Moana Oceania perspectives are often marginalised or misunderstood.

Participants underscored the deeply relational nature of these spaces. Regular meetings facilitate the building of trust and familiarity, which, in turn, allow colleagues to have candid conversations about the successes and challenges within their education systems. Furthermore, these relationships foster quiet solidarity when navigating or resisting misaligned expectations from donors or external agencies.

Participants recognised inherent tensions within the concept of regionalism. For instance, discussions regarding the University of the South Pacific (USP) revealed concerns that, at times, regional institutions might inadvertently compete with, rather than support, developing national universities.

“With the upcoming national universities, USP needs to restructure, refocus and not offer programmes that national universities can have...Because of the country’s commitment towards regionalism, they continue to support the university as far as they can” (P5, University Employee).

The tension between solidarity and competition, while not unique to Tonga, significantly impacts the future role of TNU. Participants expressed a desire for a regional educational ecosystem where the University of the South Pacific (USP), TNU, and other national universities occupy distinct, mutually reinforcing niches, thereby avoiding duplication of offerings or direct competition for students.

Regionalism, as described by participants, is both a relational space of familiarity, trust, and shared context, and a political arena where institutional mandates, funding streams, and status are negotiated. For TNU, the key challenge is to engage in regional networks in a manner that

strengthens mutual support and relational ties, without allowing regional institutions to overshadow national priorities or re-centralise authority away from Tonga.

Regionalism, Theme 3: Labour Mobility, Remittances and National Capacity

The circulation of Tongans throughout Moana Oceania, facilitated by labour mobility schemes, was another dimension of regionalism. Participants linked these mobility patterns and their rapid expansion (from approximately 2% to 8% of Tonga's population in just a few years) to the evolving function of TNU and its educational output. Consequently, education has been both a catalyst for and a victim of this increased participation in regional and bilateral labour programs.

One participant described how parents view work opportunities abroad as a primary avenue for economic security,

“A lot of parents...see public service as the only opportunity for work here and if you're not working, they send the kids at a very young age to go off and get money and help things” (P4, Government Employee).

The demand for seasonal workers in regional agriculture and other industries presents a competing draw that can pull young people away from formal education or local jobs. This phenomenon raises concerns among participants about the potential "*decimation of a productive population*" in rural areas. However, participants also recognised the vital role remittances play in sustaining household livelihoods and even in covering educational expenses, such as school fees. Consequently, regional labour schemes were characterised by several participants as both essential and troubling. For instance, P6's reflection on seasonal work highlights this tension,

“Some of our workers quit and go for overseas work. This is an easy way out, easy money as well. I think that's the main issue here. There's also the issue of human rights as well, if it's their right to choose...where they go and what they do. If we impose a certain type of policy that actually constricts them, they will always choose. It's very hard to put the limitations on that” (P6, University Employee).

Participants framed labour mobility as an ethical dilemma rather than a purely economic one, even while upholding the right to move. They advocated for system-level solutions, specifically expanding domestic training programs, to mitigate the skills gap left by worker departures.

TNU's engagement with regional qualification frameworks and standards is significant. While regionally recognised certificates and diplomas can enhance worker mobility and improve bargaining power, they simultaneously risk accelerating the departure of skilled graduates. The

dual nature of this dynamic is evident in programs like aged care, which are designed to serve both local and international markets. Participants' interpretations indicate that regional labour mobility should not be categorised as "*brain drain*" or solely as "*opportunity*." Instead, it is an essential, structural component of Tonga's regional integration that demands careful, strategic management. The *talanoa* with participants focused on strategies for TNU to monitor its graduates' career paths better, foster circular migration (including mechanisms for returning to and re-entering the Tongan workforce), and advocate within regional forums for labour schemes that avoid disproportionately depleting vital sectors of their capacity.

Regionalism extends beyond formal policies and meetings, residing in the daily lives and spatial realities of Tongan families. For these families, crucial decisions regarding schooling, enrolment at TNU, and participation in seasonal employment in Australia or Aotearoa New Zealand are deeply interconnected. Consequently, TNU's ability to contribute to national priorities is partly determined by its strategic position within these regional movements, ideally functioning as both a foundational anchor and a stepping stone.

Internationalisation, Theme 1: Partnerships, Consultants and Negotiating External Influence

Participants consistently viewed internationalisation as being less about achieving high rankings or global branding, and more about navigating a complex network of partnerships, consultants, and projects that interact with Tonga's ongoing education reforms. Though official policy documents focus on tangible elements such as donor-funded infrastructure, scholarships, and technical assistance, the personal accounts emphasise the crucial relational and political effort required to ensure these collaborations truly align with Tongan priorities and values.

An example of this focus on relationships came from a government employee, who characterised the optimal consultant engagement as dialogic and highly responsive to the specific context.

“The content, we very much have a lot of input in it...the consultants are coming with new ways of looking at and presenting. But our people are the writers...we try to reach a compromise...what is best for Tonga” (P10, Government Employee).

This demonstrates Tonga's active agency, where local educators act as both writers and decision-makers. They incorporate "*international best practices*" but maintain that the ultimate authority rests with those familiar with the Tongan context. Key to these relationships were the Tongan values of hospitality, *faka'apa'apa* (respect), and *tauhi vā* (maintaining relationships), which dictated how international experts were received and how conflicts were resolved.

Conversely, participants also recounted instances where internationalisation efforts failed. For example, one story involved an earlier education framework created by foreign consultants that was essentially a direct copy of another country's policy.

“It was developed by a group from Australia...They went with the same template to Kiribati, to Samoa, to Tonga...They forgot one of their folders...It was exactly the same thing... ‘Samoa education system’...We deliberately did not [implement it] because it was developed by an overseas consultant who knew nothing about the Tongan context” (P3, Government Employee).

Another participant mentioned feeling the necessity to "let go" of consultants when they proved unwilling to listen truly,

“They are willing to listen to us. But there are some who are not willing to listen. And that is when we have differences, and then we’ll have to let go of them...It hampers our progress when we have people who are not willing to negotiate” (P10, Government Employee).

These accounts position internationalisation as a site for essential, ongoing, and critical negotiation. Successful collaborations were defined by mutual listening, humility, and a shared commitment to "*working for Tonga*," rather than being driven by donor indicators or consultants' desire for reputation building. Conversely, unproductive relationships were characterised by the dominance of external agendas, donor-imposed timelines, or situations in which "*research projects end when the funding ends, leaving gaps*" (P9, University Employee). Consequently, TNU must actively curate its international partnerships. While the university and the Ministry cannot control every external actor, they can establish clearer expectations regarding contextualisation, co-design, and accountability to national priorities. Participants' narratives strongly suggest that *anga fakatonga*, including the *faa’i kavei koula* (the four golden pillars of Tonga) of respect, relationship, humility, and loyalty, are powerful resources for sustaining ethical, effective partnerships.

Internationalisation, Theme 2: Epistemic Inequities and Knowledge Access

Discussions about knowledge production and access also revealed a facet of internationalisation. Participants highlighted structural inequities in who can participate in global academic conversations and on what terms. Limited access to journals, databases, and academic training was identified as a significant barrier.

For Tonga, internationalisation primarily involves the flow of knowledge into the country, rather than the outward movement of students or staff. This knowledge flow is significantly

hindered by paywalled resources, which restrict TNU academics and students' ability to access current scholarship, publish in prestigious venues, or contribute to global academic discussions in their authentic voices. Participants connected this constraint to broader issues of epistemic justice, where locally circulated knowledge is globally invisible.

Institutional capacity challenges and accreditation procedures further exacerbate these inequities. As one participant highlighted, the high costs associated with programme accreditation, including the need to engage overseas experts, compound these difficulties.

“It’s not inexpensive, and it takes a long time...You need a panel and pay overseas experts.” (P5, Government Employee)

The current quality assurance processes, often rooted in foreign regulatory standards and logic, tend to overlook Tongan knowledge systems and resource limitations. While participants acknowledged the necessity of strong quality assurance, they raised concerns that the existing international and regional regulatory frameworks might unintentionally perpetuate dependency and hierarchy.

Regionalism (e.g. USP acting as a knowledge hub) was described as both a bridge and a barrier in this regard. Regional networks, while offering access to resources and collaborative opportunities, can inadvertently concentrate expertise and reinforce the perception that cutting-edge knowledge resides external to the institution.

For TNU, addressing disparities in access to knowledge, epistemic inequities, is therefore a strategic imperative, going beyond technical solutions like subscriptions and bandwidth. It is fundamentally about repositioning the university as a producer, rather than merely a consumer, of knowledge. Potential avenues for this shift, as suggested by participants, include leveraging the expertise of staff who have successfully *“reached the unreached”* (P8, University Employee) and whose work in areas such as climate change, SDGs, and disaster risk management has already influenced national policy. Furthermore, TNU can foster research that prioritises Tongan realities and Indigenous knowledge, even if its initial dissemination occurs primarily in local or regional spheres.

Internationalisation, Theme 3: Balancing Global Benchmarks with Anga Fakatonga in Programme Design

Participants concluded by discussing the tension between global expectations for higher education and the integration of *anga fakatonga* across curriculum, assessment, and institutional operations. While acknowledging the necessity of international standards,

accreditation, and outcomes-based frameworks, participants also viewed them as external or incompatible with their context,

“Standards of various kinds are required to abide by and comply with like those we currently experience with regards to the TNQAB standards...all these are foreign ways of regulating certain things so that we will be drawn closer to where these standards would like us to be at” (P9, University Employee).

Global and regional standards create a complex tension for universities. While offering the promise of recognition and comparability, they simultaneously steer institutions toward specific models of what constitutes a “good” university or programme. Participants expressed caution about a potential unidirectional shift toward external benchmarks, fearing it could compromise contextual relevance. Nevertheless, some participants detailed innovative approaches for integrating international “best practices” with Tongan values. In the realm of curriculum reform, for instance, one participant elaborated,

“More international best practices [were] involved...but...we try to reach an even playing field where we talk together and present our views. They present theirs, and...[we present what] will be the best for us...It’s difficult work because sometimes you’re working on behalf of the country” (P10, Government Employee).

The concept of *anga fakatonga* is presented here as an active mode of engagement rather than a static cultural attribute. It fosters an environment of hospitality and respect that welcomes overseas consultants while simultaneously inviting them to listen carefully and adapt their recommendations. Tongan educators strategically utilise local institutions and community resources, such as *“our local universities...key players in education here”* (P10, Government Employee), to build internal synergy for reforms, rather than ceding the direction-setting role to external actors.

A stark contrast is drawn through cautionary examples, like the imported policy framework that failed due to unrealistic assumptions about resource availability and teacher capacity in Tongan primary schools. This resulted in superficial learning, such as students memorising science diagrams without hands-on experience, powerfully illustrating how context-blind benchmarking can undermine educational depth.

For the TNU, the challenge is not whether to engage with global benchmarks, as this is unavoidable, but *how* to approach this engagement. Participants’ narratives converge on three essential guiding principles:

1. **Selective Appropriation:** Global and regional frameworks must be selectively adopted, not wholesale, and rigorously evaluated against Tonga's distinct values, resource realities, and long-term national aspirations.
2. **Cultural Integration in Process:** *Anga fakatonga* should shape not only curriculum content (e.g., Tongan language and culture courses) but also critical operational processes, including decision-making, conflict resolution, and the cultivation of relationships with external partners.
3. **Leveraging for Strength:** International engagement should be utilised as a tool to fortify TNU's vital role as a custodian of Tongan identity and a centre for Indigenous innovation, ensuring it does not displace these core functions.

Multi-Scalar Collaborative Sensemaking Synthesis

The Tonga case study reveals that understanding and addressing national priorities, regional dynamics, and international engagement is a continuous, multi-scalar negotiation rather than a straightforward policy implementation process. While participants at the national level stressed that the TNU is mandated to support the priorities of the Tonga Strategic Development Framework II (TSDF II) and the Economy-wide Planning Framework (EPF) 2020-3030, which include human development, fostering a dynamic knowledge-based economy, and promoting culturally grounded leadership, the practical alignment between TNU's current activities and these national priorities remains fragile and incomplete. This challenge is compounded by several factors: institutional fragmentation, the absence of reliable data on tertiary completion rates, and the lack of an officially endorsed strategic plan. Collectively, these issues limit the ability to clearly demonstrate how TNU's programmes, staffing, and partnerships advance Tonga's overall development vision.

The TNU is intrinsically linked to various regional bodies and frameworks. Regionalism is highly valued, as it provides solidarity, shared standards, and facilitates labour mobility through key mechanisms such as the PacREF, the EQAP, the PQF, the USP, and the RSE and PALM schemes. For participants, these arrangements were seen as vital for benchmarking quality and establishing pathways for Tongan graduates across Moana Oceania. However, these regional arrangements were also perceived as asymmetrical. Regional institutions such as USP operate as both partner and competitor. In contrast, regional quality frameworks risk pulling TNU towards homogenising templates that do not always accommodate *anga fakatonga* or the constraints of a newly established national university.

Internationally, donor partnerships, scholarships, and global policy frameworks create a mix of opportunities and dependencies. Internationalisation provides critical financial resources, technical expertise and study pathways, but it also introduces external priorities and models of ‘good’ higher education that may misalign with Tongan realities. Participants felt torn between the pressure to adhere to external standards and funding requirements and their ambition to establish TNU as a protector of Tongan identity and a site of Indigenous innovation. They wanted TNU to be seen as an agent of its own policy agenda, rather than simply as an implementer of imported policies with no autonomy.

TNU occupies a liminal space, as revealed through collaborative sensemaking across various scales. While symbolically representing Tonga's higher education sovereignty project and a commitment to embed the values of *faka'apa'apa*, *fetokoni'aki* (reciprocity), and *tauhi vā* within its institutional culture, the university currently lacks a clear operational centre. This practical search for stability is hampered by factors including a hierarchical governance structure, politicised decision-making processes, fragmented institutional histories resulting from mergers, and an underdeveloped scholarly infrastructure. The *talanoa* also highlighted strong aspirations for a culturally grounded, relational, nationally responsive university that can steward both skills development and knowledge sovereignty.

The core insight of this research is a multi-scalar synthesis. National universities in Moana Oceania engage with national, regional, and international pressures through relational, context-specific sensemaking, moving beyond mere adherence to external models. For Tonga, the future path necessitates not only strategic planning, data systems, and structural reform, but is fundamentally an ethical and epistemic challenge. It is grounded in *anga fakatonga* to shape how TNU engages with regionalism and internationalisation, and to position itself as a university that can hold national priorities, Indigenous knowledge systems, and regional/global engagement in productive tension. Building on this synthesis, the subsequent section assesses the broader significance of the Tongan case study. This examination focuses on its emerging priorities, enduring challenges, strategic opportunities, and potential avenues for future research.

Research Significance and Implications

This section further synthesises key insights, outlining the merging priorities, persistent challenges, strategic opportunities, and future research directions shaping Tonga and TNU's journey to balance national development priorities, regionalism and internationalisation. The

themes identified in the Tonga case study are relationally interpreted understandings shaped through dialogues, accountability, and contexts. Together, these themes illuminate the tensions and possibilities inherent in building a culturally grounded, future-oriented national higher education institution in Tonga. The section closes by reflecting on the broader significance of the findings, considering how Tongan systems of knowledge intersect with broader theoretical frameworks, and laying the groundwork for the analyses that follow.

Reflecting on Conducting Research in Tonga

The research in Tonga necessitated a continuous commitment to relational ethics and *anga fakatonga*. This case study involved in-person *talanoa* with participants from TNU and related institutions. These conversations primarily occurred in the participants' offices and workspaces, scheduled around their professional obligations. These settings were not neutral; they inherently reflected institutional histories, power dynamics, and daily practices. As an external, non-Indigenous researcher, entering these spaces required careful navigation of positionality, adherence to local protocols, and a strong dedication to reciprocity.

The adoption of *talanoa* as the primary method in Tonga was a deliberate methodological and ethical choice. This approach fostered dialogic environments, allowing participants to share their perspectives freely, unencumbered by rigid questioning. My role involved attentive listening, asking clarifying questions, and following the natural flow of the conversation. Crucially, these *talanoa* sessions embodied the values of *faka'apa'apa* (respect) and *tauhi vā* (maintaining relationships). Participants did not just discuss these concepts; they actively practised them. Aspects such as allocating relational time, sharing narratives, acknowledging the institutional and relational genealogies, and tending to the *vā* (relational space) proved as vital to the research process as any formal data collection activities.

The research methodology embraced a co-constructed approach, moving beyond extractive analysis through a collaborative sensemaking process that deepened participants' relational connections and commitments. Preliminary interpretations were returned to participants for their review, critique, and refinement. In the Tongan context, this meant participants functioned as co-analysts, not merely as data sources, confirming or redirecting emergent themes. Their involvement was vital in shaping how national, regional, and international dynamics were interpreted, ensuring the analysis remained accountable, relevant, and fair from a culturally grounded perspective.

The Tonga fieldwork provided critical insights into the inherent limitations and tensions of external research within Indigenous settings. Specifically, the necessity of primarily using English for *talanoa*, despite efforts to learn and use *lea faka-Tonga* greetings and phrases, inadvertently reinforced English's dominance in academic contexts. Furthermore, the limited duration of the fieldwork and competing demands on participants' time restricted the scope of participation and the potential to sustain deep relationships both during and after the research. These realities mandated constant reflexivity and regular dialogue with cultural advisors and supervisors, to actively challenge personal assumptions, navigate power dynamics, and adapt to participant feedback.

Ultimately, the research conducted in Tonga validated the need for ethical and rigorous inquiry in Indigenous higher education contexts to be relational, iterative, and deeply context responsive. It requires a commitment to a pace that honours *anga fakatonga* while simultaneously pursuing the broader analytical goal of understanding how a new national university manages multi-scalar pressures. Thus, the Tonga case study offers not only substantive data on TNU but a methodological blueprint for respectfully and critically integrating Indigenous and Euro-Western research approaches within Moana Oceania.

Emerging and Continuing Priorities

The TNU remains at a formative stage in defining its institutional identity, positionality and strategic direction. The collaborative sensemaking process revealed a clear priority to move beyond a symbolic towards a genuinely transformative higher education institution that aligns with Tonga's development priorities while grounded in *anga fakatonga*. There is strong consensus among participants that this requires an intentional embedding of Tongan values such as *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *fetokoni'aki* (reciprocity), and *tauhi vā* (relationality) into governance, curriculum, and partnerships. Workforce alignment, particularly in high-demand sectors such as aged care, tourism, construction, and education, remains a central goal, alongside the cultivation of Indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate and valued sources of expertise within the national university.

TNU faces a critical, emerging need to enhance its organisational coherence. Key to this is finalising a collaboratively developed strategic plan, which participants highlighted as essential. Furthermore, strengthening internal communication across the recently consolidated Faculties and establishing a clear, shared identity as a national university, specifically "*through a Tongan*

lens" (P8, University Employee), are paramount. This clarified identity is vital for guiding decisions related to programme development, staffing, resource allocation, and external engagement. Without this clarity, TNU risks being driven by external agendas rather than proactively defining its own path.

Finally, an ongoing priority remains securing the necessary epistemic and infrastructural foundation for TNU to function as a site of knowledge production in addition to knowledge delivery. This requires strategic investment in research capacities, access to scholarly resources, and dedicated institutional spaces for *talanoa*, research collaboration, and community engagement. Participants envision TNU as a place where Tongan histories, languages, and knowledge are actively cultivated for present and future generations. The university is thus positioned to imagine national development not only through global frameworks of skills, innovation, and growth, but also through Indigenous, relational frameworks.

Challenges

The lack of reliable data on tertiary completions is a significant gap for data-informed policymaking, hindering efforts to align PSET with national development priorities. This complicates Tonga's ability to balance the expectations of diverse stakeholders, including at the national level, where the government strives to increase support for the domestic labour market. Regionally, institutions (e.g., USP) and frameworks (e.g., PQF) emphasise comparability and mobility, and internationally, scholarship programmes and donor partnerships often guide students toward particular academic qualifications. Without robust PSET data and an institutional strategic plan, it will be a persistent challenge to assess how effectively Tonga's PSET contributes to these various priorities, or even to evaluate whether its investments in scholarship schemes and institutional investments are producing the desired outcomes.

Institutional fragmentation remains a central obstacle. The merger of disparate institutes into TNU has yet to produce a coherent organisational identity or unified vision. Hierarchical governance structures, shaped by deeply embedded cultural and political traditions, can limit inclusivity, stifle innovation, and marginalise younger or reform-minded professionals. Participants described decision-making processes that were highly centralised and sometimes politicised, with limited channels for staff to contribute to strategic discussions. Persistent resource constraints, ranging from insufficient academic staffing and infrastructure to limited

access to scholarly resources, compound these issues and reinforce Tonga's peripheral position in the global knowledge economy.

The dual role of regional institutions such as USP, both partner and competitor, further complicates TNU's ability to position itself in Tonga's national development. TNU faces significant relational and structural challenges, shaped by regional and global higher education hierarchies and internal issues. For instance, while the USP provides crucial regional expertise and pathways, its dominant presence risks diminishing TNU's legitimacy and visibility unless carefully managed. A similar dynamic occurs with international partnerships, where the external design and subsequent importation of projects, programmes, or quality standards into Tonga often limit local adaptation, potentially replicating asymmetrical power relations.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges, participants identified significant opportunities for transformative change. There is a strong capacity for culturally grounded partnerships, both domestic and international, when guided by principles of respect, relationality and reciprocity. Strategic institutional planning, tailored to local labour market needs and development priorities, while also preparing graduates for regional and global opportunities, presents a pathway for relevance and sustainability. Because TNU functions as a consolidated national institution, it is better positioned to engage coherently with government, private sector, and community partners than the previously fragmented PSET sector.

The symbolic, transformative and practical potential of TNU to re-centre Indigenous epistemologies positions it as a catalyst for a decolonising higher education in Tonga and the wider Moana Oceania region. Participants pointed to possibilities such as establishing a Centre for Tongan Language and Culture, deepening the use of *lea faka-Tonga* across programmes, and designing qualifications “born out of Tonga, its people, its unique sets of knowledge and skills, values and beliefs” (TNU, 2025). These initiatives would not only safeguard intangible heritage but also affirm TNU's authority as a producer of Indigenous knowledge and a contributor to global scholarship from a Tongan vantage point.

Reimagining internationalisation as knowledge diplomacy, rather than a one-way transfer, presents significant opportunities. Development partners and foreign universities can become truly relational collaborators by acknowledging TNU's intellectual leadership, aligning projects

with national priorities, and committing to long-term, reciprocal partnerships. The Tonga case study demonstrates that international engagement achieves its most significant transformative impact when it reinforces, rather than displaces, TNU's vital function as a national and Indigenous institution. However, capitalising on this opportunity demands continuous vigilance to prevent external funding and standards from subtly re-centring Euro-Western epistemic norms or compromising TNU's essential local and cultural accountability.

Research Futures

The Tonga case study suggests four key areas for future research concerning national universities, Indigenous higher education, and multi-scalar sensemaking in Moana Oceania.

1. Tongan-Led Research and Local Epistemologies:

There is a clear opportunity for Tongan scholars to lead research that expands upon these findings. Studies conceived, executed, and interpreted by Tongan academics, conducted entirely in *lea faka-Tonga* and grounded in Tongan epistemologies, would offer unique, inaccessible insights to external researchers and simultaneously bolster local research capacity.

2. Longitudinal Studies of TNU's Evolution:

Future research should track the longitudinal development of the TNU, focusing on its evolving institutional identity and strategic direction. This work could trace how changes, such as governance reforms, strategic planning, or the creation of new academic units (e.g., the Centre for Tongan Language and Culture), impact the university's ability to align with national priorities and engage with regional and global partners on its own terms. Long-term, mixed-methods research, combining institutional ethnography, policy analysis, and quantitative tracking of graduate outcomes, is necessary to document the impacts of TNU's development over time comprehensively.

3. Detailed Labour Market and Graduate Trajectory Research:

A more detailed understanding of the labour market and graduate trajectories is needed, connecting PSET pathways, tertiary education completion rates, and employment tracer study data in Tonga. Addressing current data deficiencies would benefit national planning and enable more nuanced analyses of how scholarships, TVET provision, and university programmes contribute to national development or, conversely, perpetuate inequities related to gender, geography, and socio-economic status.

4. Comparative and Collaborative Research Across Moana Oceania:

Finally, comparative and collaborative research across Moana Oceania could advance the conceptualisation of higher education rooted in culture and context. Such studies would examine how diverse national universities navigate similar multi-scalar pressures using distinct Indigenous philosophies and political histories. This comparative approach would deepen theoretical understandings of Indigenous higher education while remaining anchored in *motutapu* as a guiding framework for ethical, relational, and decolonising scholarship.

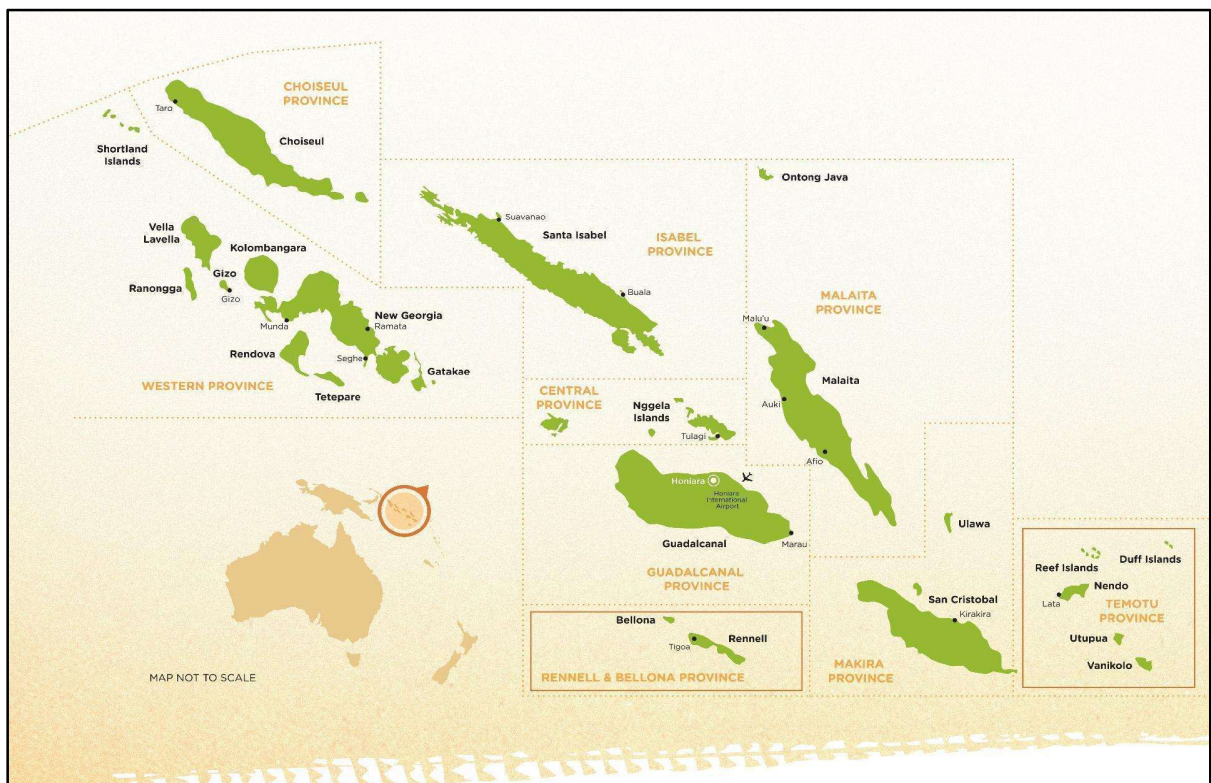
Chapter 6. Case Study: Solomon Islands

The Contexts

The Solomon Islands is a diverse archipelago of six large islands and nearly 1,000 islands in total, of which around 350 are inhabited (Figure 08 below) (SINSO, 2023). Honiara, on Guadalcanal, serves as the national capital and central urban centre. The nation is characterised by remarkable cultural and linguistic diversity, a youthful population, environmental vulnerabilities, and a socio-economic profile heavily shaped by its resource base, external aid, and regional migration. This section outlines the demographic, socio-economic, environmental, political-institutional, and educational contexts, situating the analysis of higher education within broader national realities and external pressures.

Figure 08.

Map of the Solomon Islands



Source: Solomon Islands Tourism (n.d.). <https://tourismsolomons.com/solomon-islands-map/>.

Demographic Contexts

The country has experienced 30% population growth over the 10 years from the 2009 to 2019 censuses, with the 2019 census reporting an estimated population of 720,000 and a near-even split between females (49.5%) and males (50.5%) (SINSO, 2023). As previously mentioned, a youthful population is evident, with a median age of 21.4 years and one-third of the population under 15 years old (SINSO, 2023). The majority of Solomon Islanders live in rural areas and across dispersed islands (73%), with 27% living in the urban areas, primarily the capital city of Honiara (18%) (SINSO, 2023). These demographic realities highlight clear challenges for public-sector delivery, particularly in education. Religion is integrated through governance, education and social structures, predominantly Christian denominations. Cultural values are grounded in *kastom*, community-based (collective) land tenure, kinship obligations, and reciprocal exchange, all of which influence governance, education and development practices (Rohorua, 2007). The Solomon Islands' motto "To Lead Is To Serve" reflects a broader ethic of humility, service and relationality, which resonates with other Moana Oceania contexts, but has particular manifestations in Solomon Islands' social structures (Clements & Foley, 2008).

Socio-Economic Contexts

According to the World Bank (WB, 2025h), the Solomon Islands is classified as a Lower Middle-Income Country (LMIC). This classification, however, does not adequately reflect the household realities of the majority of residents, many of whom rely heavily on subsistence agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and remittances. In 2024, the GDP was estimated to be approximately \$1.76 billion (USD) (WB, 2025f), with the most significant economic drivers being logging, mining, agriculture, and fisheries (Passmore, 2025), but also a significant percentage received from donor aid (\$300 million USD in 2022) (Lowy Institute, 2024) and remittances. As the primary economic drivers are commodity-based, the national GDP fluctuates considerably due to external markets, natural disasters, and political tensions (WB, 2025f).

The primary economic activity and wage-based labour are centralised in Honiara. In contrast, the extractive industries (e.g., forestry, fisheries) are also centralised there, while the majority of the population is mainly engaged in the informal economy in rural areas (73%) (SINSO, 2023). Data from household income surveys clearly indicate disparities across the geographic contexts. According to the 2019 Census, the top source of household income was crop sales

(37%). It is also important to note that livelihood resilience is often stronger in rural areas, where extended family and subsistence-based practices provide ancestral support and reduce the impact of individual income loss. Labour statistics underscore limited formal-sector opportunities, with just 20% of the eligible workforce in formal employment, and high underemployment and youth unemployment (estimated at over 25%). Seasonal work schemes in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand are increasingly significant for both household income and skills development. However, they also create risks of domestic ‘brain drain’ and dependency on remittances (SINSO, 2023).

Environmental Contexts

The Solomon Islands is vulnerable to natural disasters, specifically sea-level rise, earthquakes, cyclones and the associated impacts of climate change. Low-lying atolls in particular face threats from flooding, while larger islands experience deforestation, flooding and erosion. The country is ranked among the most at-risk nations globally in terms of exposure to natural hazards. These environmental pressures directly shape national development priorities and underscore the importance of climate resilience, sustainable resource management, and disaster preparedness; all of which have implications for educational programming and training (GFDRR, 2009; PCCP, 2025).

Political-Institutional Contexts

The Solomon Islands features a dynamic political and institutional landscape, characterised by a complex interplay of *kastom*, traditional governance, religious authority, Commonwealth influence, and contemporary parliamentary democracy. *Kastom* leadership remains central in many communities, with chiefs and elders exercising authority over lands, resources, and conflict resolution. Customary land tenure accounts for the majority of the country and strongly influences development activities. Christianity is a cornerstone of daily life, with churches serving as providers of education, health and other community services. The moral authority of religious institutions continues to influence educational governance and curricular design. As a member of the Commonwealth, the Solomon Islands regularly draws on external governance and higher education frameworks (‘policy borrowing’) while engaging in partnerships with other postcolonial Commonwealth states. Since independence from the British in 1978, the country has operated a Westminster-style parliamentary system. However, governance is often strained by limited capacity, geographic dispersal, and the legacies of ethnic conflict and

instability (1998-2003). Regional assistance, particularly through the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), has historically played a stabilising role (Leith, 2011).

Education Sector Contexts

The educational contexts of the Solomon Islands are also influenced and reflective of *kastom*, Christianity, donor influence and national development priorities. The Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD) is responsible for sector-wide education policy, planning and coordination. The Solomon Islands Tertiary Education and Skills Authority (SITESA), established in 2017, registers and accredits PSET providers and qualifications, national tertiary scholarships schemes, and the Solomon Islands Qualifications Framework (SIQF). Public education relies heavily on donor funding, with Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and multilateral agencies (e.g., the World Bank, ADB, UNICEF) providing significant support for infrastructure, skills development, and technical policy guidance. Although domestic financing is constrained by fiscal limits, with shifting percentages over the last ten years (21.8%-2015, 33.4%-2019, 30%-2020, 24%-2023), the Solomon Islands continues to surpass the benchmark of 20% of total government allocation to education established by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) (GPE, 2025b; Narsey, 2022). External partners play a pivotal role in curriculum reform, training, infrastructure, and scholarships. While these partnerships expand opportunities, they have raised questions of dependency and alignment with national priorities. While access to education has expanded, disparities remain for rural and remote island students in particular. Gender parity has primarily been achieved at the primary school level but widens significantly at the secondary and tertiary levels. Students with disabilities face significant barriers, and digital inequities exacerbate educational exclusion. Recent education sector plans emphasise the priorities of gender and inclusion, quality teaching and learning, and system strengthening, informed by data that focus on inclusive planning and gender-responsive policy (MEHRD, 2019, 2022).

In higher education, the Solomon Islands National University (SINU), established in 2013, serves as the flagship tertiary provider and is central to the country's efforts to align education with national priorities while navigating pressures of regional integration and internationalisation.

Post-School Education & Training (PSET) in the Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands' PSET sector has been shaped by national development priorities, regional cooperation, and global imperatives, with institutions reflecting both the country's unique cultural contexts and the influence of external partners (MEHRD, 2019).

Development of PSET in the Solomon Islands

Early Foundations (1950s - 1980s)

In the late 1950s, Christian missionaries began to develop institutionalised education, particularly for vocational and skills training. However, even after repeated attempts, they were met with cultural, community and systemic barriers as their primary “...purpose was to change traditional beliefs and ideas, so customs, traditions and Indigenous knowledge had very little place” (Maebuta, 2011, p.163; MEHRD, 2005). In 1959, the British established the British Solomon Islands Training College, which later changed its name to the Solomon Islands Teachers College after independence (SINU, 2025b). In 1965, the PNG University of Technology and the University of Papua New Guinea were established by the Government of Australia through the Currie Commission, and in 1969, the University of the South Pacific (USP) was established in Fiji with support from the UK and New Zealand Governments, providing opportunities to send people overseas for higher qualifications and technical training. However, at the time, there were constraints and critiques of USP for failing to support member nations, particularly the Solomon Islands equitably, and for not adequately adapting curricula to regional or national needs (Maenu'u, 1988). Prior to independence in 1978, most tertiary institutions were managed in a decentralised manner by the respective government ministry of that institution's specialisation. Post-independence higher education emphasised workforce development to support nation-building. With donor support, technical and vocational (TVET) institutions were developed, focusing on various trades, teacher education, and maritime training (WB, 1982). Much of the system during this period was oriented towards preparing Solomon Islanders for immediate employment in the public sector and resource industries, such as the National Trade, Testing, & Training Certificate (NTTTC) with their accompanying apprenticeships, which began in 1981 and remains a programme today (Penney & Draper, 2022). A 1983 review of USP from member governments continued to highlight significant gaps in meeting their distinct needs: “Each country has its own national goals and development objectives, which are separate and distinct from the others...[and member governments]

expects USP to give [them] the assistance [they] need” (Maenu’u, 1988, p.316). In response to calls for the Solomon Islands to withdraw from USP membership and to develop nationally governed universities (Maenu’u, 1988), the Solomon Islands took a significant step towards strengthening higher education for Solomon Islanders in 1984 when Parliament passed the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education Act. This legislation facilitated the consolidation of existing government tertiary institutions (the Teachers’ College, the Public Administration Training School, the Ranadi Marine Training School, the Honiara Nursing School, and the Honiara Technical Institute) into the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE). These schools later evolved into SICHE’s academic divisions: the School of Education, the School of Finance and Administration, the School of Marine and Fisheries Studies, the School of Nursing and Health Sciences, the School of Industrial Development and the School of Natural Resources.

Institutional Growth and Diversification (1990s - 2000s)

TVET continued to expand to support rural development, particularly through academic programmes in nursing, teaching, and agriculture. This expansion developed the Rural Training Centres (RTCs), supported by funds from the European Union (Maebuta, 2011), and Community High Schools (CHS), which integrated vocational training within secondary schools. However, this rapid expansion also created challenges of fragmentation, uneven quality, and increased migration to urban centres in search of financial opportunities with these new skills (Walters et al., 2020). Maebuta (2011) critiques the early implementation of RTCs for this reason: communities received little benefit, youth failed to stay in their communities in pursuit of economic opportunities, and the quality of their education was subpar compared to that offered by the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE). Participation was predominantly male, creating a complicated societal dynamic. Maebuta continued his critique, stressing that TVET needed to be repositioned away from being a preferred option for secondary dropouts (‘second chance’) and presented as a genuine and relevant opportunity for many Solomon Island youth (Maebuta, 2011).

Quality Assurance and Reform (2005 - 2011)

In 2008, the national government recognised the need to diversify and modernise PSET opportunities, amending the 1984 SICHE Act to authorise the inclusion of new schools. This expansion also marked a significant shift towards greater alignment of PSET with the country’s

emerging economic sectors and societal needs. By the late 2000s, SICHE had broadened into a more comprehensive institution, comprising the School of Education and Humanities (SOEH), the School of Business and Management (SBM), the School of Technology and Maritime Studies (STMS), the School of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences (SNAHS), and the School of Natural Resources and Applied Sciences (SNRAS). In 2010, the MEHRD launched the Policy Statement and Guidelines for Tertiary Education in Solomon Islands, setting the framework for the next phase of national tertiary education, aligning clearly with national development priorities and cultural sustainability (MEHRD, 2010). In the same year, the USP member council approved the establishment of a dedicated campus in Honiara.

Contemporary Developments (2012 - present)

This period increased regional collaboration through the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF), supported by the Pacific Community (SPC) (SPC, 2015), and the official groundbreaking of USP's Solomon Islands campus in 2017. As national development priorities evolved, so did the academic programmes and structure of higher education. National and institutional strategies began to align PSET even more intentionally with national development strategies, labour market demands, and regional/international standards. MEHRD continued to expand access, improve quality, and build stronger pathways into tertiary opportunities both nationally and within the region (MEHRD, 2016). The transformation of SICHE into a national university was achieved in 2012, when Parliament passed legislation to establish SINU. The university officially commenced operations in January 2013. SITESA emerged in 2017 to regulate PSET, establish a national qualifications framework, and strengthen institutional accountability (SIG, 2017). In 2024, a new state-of-the-art campus of USP was established in Honiara's King George neighbourhood through a \$15.4 million (USD) loan agreement with the Asian Development Bank, a \$1.5 million (USD) grant for clean energy facilities, and private-sector donations (USP, 2025a).

Figure 09.

PSET Development Timeline of the Solomon Islands



Overview of PSET in the Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands' PSET system comprises public institutions, church-based providers, private colleges, and regional institutions (MEHRD, 2019). SITESA leads governance as the regulatory authority responsible for provider registration, programme accreditation, and qualifications management (SIG, 2017). The system remains relatively small compared to those of larger Pacific nations, but its academic offerings are diverse, spanning teacher training, health, agriculture, maritime studies, technical trades, and business studies. SITESA oversees the development and implementation of the Solomon Islands Qualifications Framework (SIQF), aligning it with regional frameworks to facilitate recognition and mobility of qualifications. It also administers programme quality assurance, monitors standards across institutions, tertiary scholarship schemes, and provides labour market data for planning alignment (NPSI, 2017). Current registered providers include³⁵:

- Solomon Islands National University (SINU)
- Don Bosco Technical Institute
- St. Peter Chanel Teachers College
- Honiara Nursing School
- Solomon Islands Association of Vocational Rural Training Centres (SIAVRTC)
- The University of the South Pacific (USP), Emalus Campus
- Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC)

PSET governance has fluctuated between MEHRD and SITESA over the last few years, as SITESA has continued to develop since the SITESA Act (2016). PSET planning is guided by the new Education Act (2023) and the 2022-2026 National Education Action Plan (NEAP) (MEHRD, 2022). However, limited resources, capacity constraints, and ongoing SITESA development have led providers to operate with significant autonomy and uneven oversight across rural and urban institutions (MEHRD, 2019). Key national PSET policy initiatives have included:

- Establishment of the National Human Resources Development and Training Plan (NHRDTP) (Close, 2012; MDPAC, 2011), and the recent accreditation of the first National Skills Packages (SIG, 2023);

³⁵ This list is unverified as the details are not publicly available via the SITESA webpage, and they have not responded to repeated requests for a confirmed list of registered PSET providers.

- Strengthening of TVET through donor-funded projects (e.g. Australia and New Zealand support, particularly the APTC and DFAT’s Skills for Economic Growth programme) (DFAT, 2019);
- Scholarship programmes to expand access to overseas higher education (e.g. DFAT’s Australia Awards; MFAT’s Manaaki New Zealand Scholarships);
- Regional collaboration via the PQF (SPC, 2017); and,
- Strengthened integration of cultural relevance and Indigenous knowledge into curricula (SINU, 2021).

Academic offerings range from short-term vocational certificates and micro-credentials to diploma-level qualifications, with SINU emerging as the only national university offering bachelor’s and postgraduate study. Programmes are concentrated in education, health, business, agriculture, and trades, reflecting both national workforce needs and donor priorities (SINU, 2021).

Capacity building for educators has relied heavily on externally sourced training schemes and partnerships, but this is slowly shifting toward delivery by Solomon Islanders. More recently, academic programmes have been introduced to improve teaching standards in TVET (APTC, 2023c, 2023d; SINU, 2025a), and SINU’s Faculty of Education provides pre-service and in-service teacher training (SINU, 2025a).

Enrolment data for the PSET sub-sector is currently unavailable as the government works to establish a digital data management system. However, partial data is available for SINU enrolments. Between 2017 and 2020, there was a 36% increase, bringing the total to 8,269 enrollees in SINU programmes in 2020. During those years, male students dominated the first two years, but in 2020, females surpassed their counterparts, with a higher enrolment percentage (SINU, 2021). Limited data make disaggregated and trend analyses difficult, but demand continues to outpace available spaces, especially at SINU (MEHRD, 2019).

Pathways to PSET

Completion rates at the secondary level remain low, restricting entry into continued, higher education. Many students exit the system early in pursuit of employment. PSET transition pathways generally favour urban youth and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds (MEHRD, 2019). TVET is central to the nation’s economic development, particularly for rural

youth. Delivered primarily through church-affiliated, rural training centres (RTCs) and SINU, TVET addresses “two interrelated issues of skilled labour shortages and youth unemployment” (p.3) (APTC, 2023c, 2023d). Despite its importance, TVET continues to face challenges, including perceived lower quality and status, underfunding, and limited articulation with higher education (Bateman et al., 2015). Scholarships are a significant pathway for accessing higher education, with government awards administered through SITESA and complemented by donor-funded schemes. These scholarships often send students overseas, shaping national human resource development while simultaneously raising concerns about labour and brain drain (Bedford & Hugo, 2012; Pearson et al., 2022).

PSET Completions

Current PSET data is limited and mostly unavailable. From discussions with research participants, completion rates vary, and attrition is high, with many students struggling due to limited academic preparedness and financial pressures. Scholarship students who go overseas often face adjustment challenges, though completion rates are generally higher because more robust support structures are available (Pearson et al., 2022).

Solomon Islands National University (SINU)

SINU today operates across three main campuses: Kukum, Ranadi, and Panatina, organised into five faculties:

- Faculty of Business and Tourism Studies
- Faculty of Science and Technology
- Faculty of Nursing, Medicine and Health Sciences
- Faculty of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
- Faculty of Education and Humanities



SINU positions itself as a leading centre of higher education and applied research in the region. Its vision is to be recognised as a quality national university that raises educational standards and advances applied knowledge. The university’s mission emphasises expanding access to higher education, nurturing diverse communities, and producing research and training that

directly address national and regional challenges. To achieve these aims, SINU is guided by a set of principles:

- ***Excellence and Quality***: a commitment to high standards in teaching, research, and professional training;
- ***Innovation***: fostering creativity and new approaches to address both enduring and emerging challenges;
- ***Relevance***: ensuring that education and research respond to the immediate and future needs of Solomon Islands society;
- ***Accessibility***: promoting inclusive access to higher education, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, religion, geography, or socio-economic background;
- ***Collegiality***: cultivating mutual respect and a sense of community within the institution.

Since its inception, SINU has played a central role in building national capacities, building a more qualified labour force and reducing dependence on overseas tertiary education providers. It continues to be a key institution in shaping the future of the Solomon Islands and contributing to regional debates in Moana Oceania.

In its most recent Strategic Plan (2021-2025), SINU has identified student, graduate and staff attributes (see Table 8 below), making clear its motivations, aspirations and approaches:

Table 08.

SINU's Student, Graduate and Staff Attributes

<u>Student Attributes</u>	<u>Graduate Attributes</u>	<u>Staff Attributes</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Positive attitude towards study ● Passion for chosen programme ● Ability to be creative and critical ● Ability to persevere and complete tasks ● Enquiring mind ● Ability to work well in groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Effective communicators ● Global aware ● Professional leaders in their field ● Creative and critical thinkers ● Work-ready and job creators ● Entrepreneurial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Planning and organisation ● Service delivery ● Teamwork ● Communication ● Creativity and innovation ● Learning and development ● Self-development and university ethos

Source: SINU, 2021

Additionally, they established six core strategic goals for the period 2021-2025 (SINU, 2021):

- **Goal 1:** Meeting Solomon Islands' human resource needs in the new national, regional, and international environment.
- **Goal 2:** Student life
- **Goal 3:** Knowledge creation and innovation
- **Goal 4:** Governance, management, and human resources
- **Goal 5:** National, regional, and international engagement and development
- **Goal 6:** Infrastructure and ICT development

It is clear from this strategic plan that SINU has acknowledged the multi-scalar realities of its positionality while centring national priorities. However, it is too early in this research to access the university's report on the strategic plan's outcomes.

National Priorities

Applying the CPA framework introduced in Chapter 3, this section will assess the placement of the SINU within the Solomon Islands' broader development framework. This assessment focuses explicitly on how national development plans, education sector strategies, and PSET policies address the university's role. The national Government outlines a long-term vision of “improving the social and economic livelihoods of all Solomon Islanders...led by ethical, accountable, respected and credible leadership that enhances and protects people’s culture, social, economic and spiritual well-being” (MDPAC, 2016, p.10) through the National Development Strategy 2016-2035 (NDS). The strategy is structured around five long-term objectives:

1. Sustained and inclusive economic growth;
2. Poverty alleviation across all sectors and improved basic needs provision;
3. Access to quality health and education for all Solomon Islanders;
4. Resilient and environmentally sustainable development with effective disaster risk management; and,
5. Unified and stable society with effective governance and public order. (SIG, 2016, p.11)

While the tertiary education sector can align and work towards all five objectives, the most directly applicable is Objective 3, which prioritises equitable access to quality learning opportunities as central to both human development and national progress. The NDS recognises that a skilled and adaptable workforce is critical to reducing aid dependency, diversifying the

economy, and ensuring young people are prepared for both local, regional and international employment opportunities.

To more clearly illustrate this alignment, Table 09 is presented below. It maps the priorities outlined in the National Development Strategy 2016-2032 (SIG, 2016) against the corresponding measures in SINU’s Strategic Plan 2021-2025 (SINU, 2021) that aim to achieve these national objectives.

Table 09.

Mapping Alignment Between the National Development Strategy (NDS) (2016-2032) and SINU’s Strategic Plan 2021-2025

NDS 2016-2035	SINU Strategic Plan 2021-2025
NDS Objective 1: Sustained and inclusive growth.	<p>Goal 1: Meeting Human Resource needs (<i>HR needs analysis, programme mix, entrepreneurship, TVET and skills</i>)</p> <p>Goal 3: Knowledge Creation and Innovation (<i>research capacity, postgraduate programmes, specialised centres</i>)</p> <p>Goal 5: National, Regional and International Engagement and Development (<i>industry, government and regional partnerships</i>)</p> <p>Goal 6: Infrastructure and ICT Development (<i>campus infrastructure, labs, ICT</i>)</p>
NDS Objective 2: Poverty alleviated across the whole of the Solomon Islands, basic needs addressed and food security improved; benefits of development more equitably distributed.	<p>Goal 1: Meeting Human Resource needs (<i>TVET expansion, trade testing, apprenticeship frameworks, equitable access</i>)</p> <p>Goal 2: Student Life (<i>Access, support, retention, wellbeing, counselling, placement</i>)</p> <p>Goal 5: National, Regional and International Engagement and Development (<i>outreach, continuing education and livelihood programmes</i>)</p>
NDS Objective 3: All Solomon Islanders have access to quality health and education.	<p>Goal 1: Meeting Human Resource needs (<i>programme mix aligned to national HR needs, improving teaching/training quality, strengthening TVET</i>)</p> <p>Goal 2: Student Life (<i>learning environments, assessment, support services, retention</i>)</p> <p>Goal 3: Knowledge Creation and Innovation (<i>research, postgraduate programmes, specialised centres</i>)</p> <p>Goal 6: Infrastructure and ICT Development (<i>learning spaces, labs, ICT</i>)</p>

	<i>access)</i>
NDS Objective 4: Resilient and environmentally sustainable development with effective disaster risk management, response and recovery.	<p>Goal 3: Knowledge Creation and Innovation, especially Objective 3.5: Interface with Solomon Islands/Pacific communities, societies and cultures (<i>Museum, Indigenous and traditional knowledge, environmental projects with government</i>)</p> <p>Goal 5: National, Regional and International Engagement and Development (<i>solar projects, collaboration with government, regional and international partners</i>)</p> <p>Goal 6: Infrastructure and ICT Development (<i>sustainable and secure physical development across campuses</i>)</p>
NDS Objective 5: Unified nation with stable and effective governance and public order	<p>Goal 3: Knowledge Creation and Innovation, Objective 3.5 (<i>museum, Indigenous and traditional knowledge, cultural interface</i>)</p> <p>Goal 4: Governance, Management and Human Resources (<i>governance, management, sustainability, staffing, performance, data-informed decision-making</i>)</p> <p>Goal 5: National, Regional and International Engagement and Development (<i>national relationships, outreach, partnerships, community access to resources</i>)</p>

Source: SIG, 2016; SINU, 2021

Within this framework, SINU has a central role in producing graduates across key fields such as education, healthcare, agriculture, fisheries, forestry, business, tourism, and trades. It also supports the broader goals of nation-building by embedding cultural knowledge, addressing gender and geographical disparities in access to tertiary education, and strengthening technical and vocational education and training (TVET) (SINU, 2021). By addressing these goals, SINU can directly contribute to national capacity-building and self-reliance. For example, in late 2024, SINU signed an agreement with the Province of Malaita (the most populous Province) to establish a 4th campus in Aligegeo, thereby expanding access, partnerships, and impact (SINU, 2025e).

SINU serves as a core mechanism for advancing the nation's long-term development goals through its strategic priorities. By offering teaching and TVET functions, SINU directly addresses crucial national human resource gaps in trade, education, and health, thereby boosting youth employment. The university actively shapes its programme development based on national human resource needs assessments and reinforces TVET, apprenticeships, and work-integrated learning. This approach creates vital pathways to wage and self-employment,

offering significant benefits, particularly for young people and rural populations. Furthermore, SINU is committed to broadening access beyond the capital, Honiara, to groups traditionally marginalised by location, gender, or socio-economic status. This is achieved through the expansion of provincial campuses, distance and online learning options, and targeted financial assistance. Ultimately, SINU has positioned itself as an institutional link connecting national economic growth with the daily livelihoods of Solomon Islanders.

SINU holds a critical national position in achieving the NDS priorities, as documented in its own strategic plans (SINU, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e). The university's strategic focus areas directly support NDS objectives in environmental sustainability, disaster resilience, social cohesion, and public-sector effectiveness. Specifically, SINU contributes vital evidence for policy and practice, particularly in the context of climate and ecological vulnerability, by developing applied research capacity, establishing postgraduate study and specialised centres in areas such as climate change, disaster risk reduction, and environmental management, and explicitly engaging with Indigenous knowledge. Internally, SINU mirrors the state's aspirations for an efficient and accountable public service through strengthening its own governance, performance management, and data-informed decision-making processes, while externally supporting broader governance reforms via programmes in leadership, public administration, and civic education. Furthermore, SINU aligns with NDS commitments to national unity and cultural heritage through community-facing initiatives, such as the planned Solomon Islands 'Village' museum at the Kakum campus, which is being developed in partnership with the Ministry of Culture & Tourism, and various cultural and outreach activities, including involvement in events like the Pacific Games.

Regionalism

SINU operates within the broader Moana Oceania regional higher education ecosystem, shaped by collective initiatives such as USP, Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) 2018-2030 (PIFS, 2018), the PQF (SPC, 2011, 2015, 2017), and the Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP) (SPC, 2015). As a member of these collaborative networks, SINU's teaching and qualifications are influenced by regional quality standards, increasing the potential for labour mobility and mutual recognition of qualifications across Moana Oceania.

The Solomon Islands is also a signatory to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, which foregrounds a people-centred development, climate resilience, and regional self-

determination (PIFS, 2022, 2024a). Education is positioned as a key enabler in this regional strategy, and SINU contributes by offering academic and research initiatives that strengthen climate resilience, sustainable resource management, and culturally relevant curricula. One example is SINU's newly established Centre for Islands' Futures, a partnership with the Indigenous Knowledge Institute (IKI), NiaTero and Arizona State University. As described by the current SINU Vice Chancellor Professor Aqorau, "The Centre for Islands Futures is not just another academic unit—it is a movement. It is a space where [I]ndigenous epistemologies, traditional ecological wisdom, and modern scientific inquiry come together to create a truly decolonised and transformative learning experience" (SINU, 2025c).

At the same time, regionalism raises questions of balance. While alignment with regional quality frameworks could strengthen mobility and recognition, it also risks privileging external standards over local priorities. For SINU, the challenge lies in ensuring that academic programmes remain rooted in Solomon Islands' cultural values, languages, and socio-economic needs, while still contributing to broader Moana Oceania aspirations of solidarity, resilience, and mobility.

Internationalisation

As with other countries of Moana Oceania, the Solomon Islands faces both opportunities and tensions in the internationalisation of higher education. Global frameworks such as the U.N. Sustainable Development Goal #4 (SDG4), which promotes inclusive, equitable, and quality lifelong education, powerfully shapes national policy development (UN, 2015). At the same time, UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education (2019) sets the groundwork for universal recognition of qualifications. It will inevitably influence how SINU designs and positions its academic programmes, even though the Solomon Islands has yet to become a signatory (UNESCO, 2019, 2023b).

Internationalisation for SINU has primarily taken the form of bilateral partnerships, donor support, research collaborations, importation of academic staff, and international scholarships. Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand remain the largest donors to the sector, providing scholarships, infrastructure investment, staff mobility, teaching and staff training. In addition, partnerships with countries such as China and India have supported specialist training programmes, particularly in fields like medicine, technology, and trades. These collaborations

have expanded SINU's capacity and provided additional pathways for student and staff mobility, though they also highlight the university's reliance on external funding and expertise.

Although SINU may not yet feel the significant pressures of global university rankings, they still shape expectations for research outputs, staff qualifications, and programme diversification. Memberships in organisations such as the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) (ACU, n.d.) and regional collaborations under SPC situate SINU as both nationally relevant and regionally connected.

Collaborative Sensemaking: the Solomon Islands Case Study

Consistent with the methodological commitments of *tok stori* outlined in Chapter 3, the collaborative sensemaking process in the Solomon Islands remained attentive to relational contexts, participants' knowledge, and the co-constructed interpretation (collaborative sensemaking). The Solomon Islands case study is analysed through collaborative sensemaking with participants, centring on how national, regional and international priorities are navigated within SINU. The analysis foregrounds how participants experienced and observed the navigation of tensions between external demands and national priorities. The themes are grounded in lived narratives, cultural values, and reflective insights, and they illustrate both opportunities and persistent challenges. *Tok stori* informed the dialogic processes through which knowledge was shared, as well as the interpretive stance taken in collaborative sensemaking. This required analysis to remain attentive to relational accountability, shared contextual understanding, and the co-constructed meaning, rather than reducing participants' narratives to isolated statements detached from their institutional and social contexts.

The Voices / Narratives (Participants and Process)

In the Solomon Islands, research ethics must be grounded in and responsive to the local contexts. Following the Solomon Islands' motto "to lead is to serve", research demands practices that uphold dignity, protect knowledge, and strengthen communal wellbeing. Consent alone is not sufficient, as research is accountable to relationships of reciprocity, humility, and respect.

For this case study, participants were drawn from SINU, government agencies, and other Solomon Islands leaders. *Tok stori* was chosen as the research method, serving as a culturally responsive foundation for ethical engagement, privileging participants' narratives, relationality,

and collective reflection over extractive questioning (Berryman et al., 2013). Sessions were held in offices, community spaces, and informal settings, according to participants' preferences. All *tok stori* were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed, and returned to participants for validation and clarification. This process safeguarded participants' narratives and ensured shared ownership of meaning-making. Following initial fieldwork analysis, emergent themes were identified and shared with participants. Narrative excerpts were anonymised and returned with prompts for collaborative sensemaking, allowing participants to refine, challenge, or affirm interpretations. In this way, analysis remained co-constructed and grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, rather than being externally imposed (Sanga & Reynolds, 2021a, 2023; Sanga et al., 2018).

Emergent Themes

The themes that emerged from *tok stori* reflect how SINU negotiates national priorities while navigating regional frameworks and international pressures. The collaborative sensemaking and narrative contributions demonstrate how the alignment, reinterpretation, and practical challenges between SINU's Strategic Plan and the NDS are negotiated in practice. Participants identified SINU as a vital mechanism for achieving the NDS's objectives, particularly concerning human resource development, equitable access, environmental resilience, and effective governance, while simultaneously noting structural limitations. This collaborative sensemaking is structured around the themes of national priorities, regionalism, and internationalisation. Across these various scales, participants emphasised knowledge sovereignty, relational ethics, and community relevance as the essential criteria for evaluating higher education, thereby offering a more nuanced perspective that complicates purely technical interpretations and approaches to both the NDS and regional frameworks.

Centring National Priorities:

- Academic Development Anchored in National Identity
- National Service Framed through Cultural, Relational Ethics
- Community Relevance as the Benchmark
- Barriers to Local Relevance

Impact of Regionalism:

- Critique of Regional Disconnect from National Needs
- USP's Failure to Adapt
- Tensions Between Regional Objectives and National Realities

- Recognition of Shared Cultural Frameworks (*wansolwara*)

Impact of Internationalisation:

- Perceived Status Hierarchies from Overseas Education
- Donor-Driven Influences Undermining National Autonomy
- Critical Need to Avoid Transactional Partnerships
- Strategic Internationalisation to Promote Indigenous Epistemology

National Priorities, *Theme 1: Academic Development Anchored in National Identity*

Participants emphasised the embedding of Indigenous knowledge and cultural values within university curricula as central to advancing national priorities and to fulfilling SINU's mandate as a national university:

"A unit called Solomon Islands Studies largely focuses on understanding our Indigenous knowledge[s], values and all this...it contributes to advancing the University knowledge industry because nobody will be able to write about that...only Solomon Islanders" (P13, University Employee).

The course represented a deliberate shift away from dependence on external knowledge toward local epistemic authority, described by one university employee (P13) as a "*corrective to imported, decontextualised curricula.*" By establishing a knowledge base that is both culturally relevant and applicable to local issues, such initiatives directly support Objectives 3 (access to quality health and education) and 4 (resilient and environmentally sustainable development) of the NDS (SIG, 2016).

Participants linked curricula to resilience practices, such as Indigenous knowledge of food preservation as "*insurance*" during disasters, or the loss of ecological knowledge in urban youth:

"urban youth no longer recognise staple wild yams, indicating a critical loss of local ecological knowledge post-COVID, which can be reversed via curricular reform" (P12, University Employee).

The university setting serves as a crucial intersection of environmental vulnerability, cultural continuity, and national development. By integrating Indigenous ecological knowledges into the curriculum, units like *Solomon Islands Studies* not only symbolically preserve these knowledges but also actively mobilise them. This mobilisation directly supports national priorities for disaster risk reduction and food security, thereby operationalising the formal alignment between the SINU and the NDS goals of resilience and sustainable livelihoods. This

is achieved by making Indigenous epistemologies explicit within programme design, assessment methods, and graduate attributes.

However, attempts to centre Indigenous knowledge are not confined to the university. Policy-side work, such as the culture syllabus for community education mentioned by P17 (Government Employee), extends into community education and post-school pathways. This parallel effort, however, is currently awaiting funding for finalisation. This situation highlights a critical point. While culture and language are central to the NDS, implementing these epistemic priorities is subject to budgetary constraints, making work in these areas vulnerable to delays.

The ongoing "*disconnect between Indigenous knowledge and formal education*" (P16, Government Employee) highlights the necessity for sustained development. Participants' desire for a curriculum that is "*relevant beyond the institution and connects to community*" (P15, University Employee) underscores that anchoring academic development in national identity is a relational and political endeavour, not just a technical one. This work necessitates ongoing collaboration with elders, communities, and provincial actors, extending beyond internal curriculum review. This urgency is echoed by P18 (Government Employee) from a research governance perspective, who noted that everyday skills such as weaving and genealogy are being lost as elders pass away, and that young people, predominantly in formal schools, have limited opportunities to learn from community knowledge holders.

National Priorities, Theme 2: National Service Framed Through Cultural, Relational Ethics

The role of the university was repeatedly framed through the ethic of service, care, and leadership, embedded in *kastom*, resonating with the national motto "To Lead Is To Serve",

"As a national university, it should be catering for the needs of Solomon Islanders. If as an institution, we do not shift people in terms of the quality of life ... we are not fulfilling our mandate" (P15, University staff).

This perspective broadens the metrics for national development beyond employability to include social cohesion, cultural continuity, and community wellbeing. Instead of viewing SINU solely as a source of human capital, participants described it as a morally grounded institution committed to making tangible contributions to people's lives. Participants drew analogies from chiefly responsibilities, describing the university as "*malamute*", offering protection and care to the broader community (P15, University Employee):

"We use symbolic language to represent the role of care that a chief plays by looking after the members of the tribe ... the 'malamute' is like the shelter provided by the tree.

So that's how I was brought up, and it influences how I perceive education” (P15, University Employee).

This imagery suggests that effective leadership is defined by responsibility and guardianship, rather than by hierarchical position or technical skill. Education, in this framing, is a form of relational service rather than individual advancement:

“The elders respect those who return home with education and contribute to community cohesion, but they are concerned when youth come back with behaviours that disrupt harmony” (P16, Government Employee).

This interpretation challenges policies that might prioritise economic growth or global competitiveness within the NDS over social cohesion. Instead, the narratives suggest that the SINU's strategic goals in governance, engagement, and student attributes should be understood through this kastom-informed ethic of service rather than through the framework of management discourse.

National Priorities, Theme 3: Community Relevance as the Benchmark

Participants shared their perspective that education is effective only when it improves lived realities:

“I normally ask the developers [of new programmes], how will the ordinary Solomon Islander benefit from this” (P15, University Employee).

This positioning serves as an informal yet potent evaluative framework that mirrors formal quality assurance processes. The primary measure of success is community relevance, not external rankings or donor targets. Consequently, the NDS Objective 1 (economic growth) (SIG, 2016) is interpreted here with a focus on improving the livelihoods of "ordinary" Solomon Islanders (P15, University Employee).

For many, relevance meant ensuring that curricula were accessible through vernacular languages, linked to livelihoods, and responsive to the aspirations of rural communities:

“Using vernacular as a medium of instruction at an early age...it's like a slower transition...to help children connect from home learning to school learning” (P11, Government Employee).

These educational strategies align with government commitments to inclusive education and acknowledge the linguistic diversity of the nation. Consequently, they challenge conventional metrics of 'quality' that often prioritise decontextualised, English-medium instruction. From a community-relevance perspective, a program's value is defined by its success in helping

children "connect from home learning to school learning" (P11, Government Employee), rather than solely by meeting external competencies.

Furthermore, participants highlighted elders' expectations that education should "*improve livelihoods in the village*" (P16, Government Employee). This demonstrates that communities are active agents negotiating, and sometimes confronting, policy implementation, not merely passive recipients. This local accountability creates a point of tension with, and exists alongside, the imperatives of NDS targets, PacREF indicators, and donor objectives. As a result, SINU staff and leaders must navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, expectations when developing and executing programs.

National Priorities, *Theme 4: Barriers to Local Relevance*

Despite the mandate to serve national priorities, participants described the persistence of disparities in local relevance and equitable access:

"In the provinces, there is nothing. When I came to do form four, I found it really hard, especially to communicate. There is a very big disparity between the capital and the provinces" (P12, University Employee).

The pathway into PSET for some students, particularly in rural areas, appears to function more as a corrective measure for systemic educational inequalities rather than a deliberate, planned progression. P17 (Government Employee) noted that some Year Six graduates are immediately entering Rural Training Centres, suggesting that PSET is absorbing students who are unprepared due to inconsistent schooling and restricted access in rural contexts. This highlights the uneven student readiness for PSET caused by these disparities. Arriving at SINU with weak English language skills limits students' capacity to benefit fully from higher education delivered in English.

"I usually take in the essays from my cousins...their grammar, everything, and English is weak. Even if they want to move higher, it stops there" (P18, Government Employee).

Structural barriers significantly influence who can and who cannot access PSET in the Solomon Islands. The narratives gathered highlight that the alignment between the SINU and the NDS should not be viewed solely in terms of strategic documents or academic programmes but must acknowledge these deep-seated inequities. Consequently, the NDS ambition that "*all Solomon Islands can access quality education*" (SIG, 2016, p.11) is undermined by systemic issues that extend beyond the capacity of universities to resolve independently.

Participants also proposed interventions for SINU, including adopting vernacular instruction and culturally responsive curricula. These measures could be delivered through bridging

programmes, regional campuses, and community-based academic delivery. Such recommendations support SINU's ongoing expansion beyond its main campus in the capital, Honiara, and underscore its vital role in creating more inclusive pathways to ensure that “*the nation's manpower needs are sustainability met*” (SIG, 2016, p.13).

Regionalism, Theme 1: Critique of Regional Disconnect from National Needs

Participants expressed scepticism about whether regional institutions, particularly USP, sufficiently respond to national contexts and priorities:

“Students travel all the way to Fiji, spend money, but everything is online now. Why can't that knowledge be accessed here?” (P14, Government Employee).

The critique concerns the effectiveness of current delivery models and regional priorities, which seem out of step with present-day realities. Specifically, the necessity of physically relocating to regional centres is debatable, given the prevalence of digital educational services and the growth of national universities, a questionable demand when the financial load falls to students' families. This development challenges traditional perceptions of the USP as the sole higher education hub in Moana Oceania, highlighting the rising importance of national institutions, such as the SINU, as key providers of higher education.

Participants also noted that when regional discourses, such as climate change, were not grounded in local language and culture, they failed to resonate with communities or facilitate local agency:

“When we went to the communities and asked them to define climate change in their own language, they were struggling. They only heard it on the radio. They understand the impacts, but not the concept in their own terms. If you don't ground it in context and culture, people won't appreciate doing something for themselves. You just create dependency” (P13, University Employee).

Regional initiatives risk entrenching dependency by disseminating abstract concepts without adequately addressing local epistemologies. The critical issue is not merely adding context through pedagogy, but determining whose knowledge fundamentally shapes the definition of problems and the solutions that result. This perspective underpins the central argument of this thesis: that regional frameworks, such as PacREF and the PQF, must be analysed through the lens of epistemic justice, rather than focusing solely on integration.

Regionalism, Theme 2: USP's Failure to Adapt

SINU, as the flagship PSET institution in the Solomon Islands, was distinguished by participants due to its local relevance, where institutions like USP do not adequately contextualise their curricula:

“At USP, sometimes they do it well, sometimes they don't...but the big questions about national relevance are not being asked” (P14, Government Employee).

There was clear recognition of the importance of USP in the development and expansion of higher education in the region. However, with the rise in national universities, USP has largely maintained the same mission and approach, instead of adapting and evolving to work in complement and partnership with national universities:

“USP was established in the 1960s for the public service...but universities have not evolved with the expectations of public service. They are still locked in outdated modes...The countries that own USP need to demand more of USP...at the moment, I predict that in five years, USP is going to be out of business” (P14, Government Employee).

These provocative narratives serve as both a critique and a call to action, highlighting a perceived misalignment between the USP and the current development priorities of its member nations. For the Solomon Islands, this sentiment underscores the strategic necessity of fortifying the SINU as the core mechanism for capacity-building aligned with the NDS, rather than relying on regionalism to deliver these outcomes.

Furthermore, these narratives challenge the assumption that national institutions must conform to regional governance agendas. Participants proposed that regional bodies should instead adapt to and complement the specific realities and missions of national universities, operating in a supportive, not substitutive, role.

Regionalism, Theme 3: Tensions Between Regional Objectives and National Realities

While there are some common challenges faced across the region, at times, the approaches to mitigate those challenges do not adequately reflect contextual pluralism and local solutions:

“They all want to be comparatively excellent to others...but I think that's the wrong one...You have to just look how you can be excellently unique and relevant to your country” (P14, Government Employee).

The participant's reflection challenges a form of regionalism that favours comparative excellence over adequate consideration of contextual pluralism. The emphasis on being

"*excellently unique*" (P14, Government Employee) aligns with the SINU strategic objective: to first address the nation's human resource needs while engaging regionally on its own terms. This perspective is further supported by the NDS's call for culturally grounded, people-centred development, which implies that national visions should act as a filter for regional benchmarks, rather than being subservient to them.

Regionalism, Theme 4: Recognition of Shared Cultural Frameworks (*wansolwara*)

Participants recognised the potential in regionalism when grounded in relational and cultural values-centred frameworks:

"[Wansolwara]...the idea of coming together to negotiate a path forward that's mutually beneficial" (P11, Government Employee).

Tok stori was also framed as a medium to create spaces for opportunity, and a way to honour both the local realities with regional solidarity:

"Tok stori provides the chance to blend the international background with Indigenous aspects so that we can find common ground for national universities" (P13, University Employee).

Participants did not advocate for rejecting regionalism, but instead emphasised the need for enhanced cooperation, collaboration, and coordination that is dialogic, culturally grounded, and mutually beneficial. This perspective reinforces the thesis's conceptualisation of regionalism as a dynamic, multi-scalar negotiation arena, rather than a rigid framework of fixed institutions or policies. When collaboration is informed by the principles of *wansolwara* and *tok stori*, regional frameworks can serve as conduits for sharing Indigenous knowledges, collaboratively addressing climate and development challenges, and strengthening Moana Oceania's epistemic leadership. For institutions like SINU, this creates an opportunity to transition from a passive recipient of regional directives to an active contributor of valuable ideas and practices, particularly in crucial areas such as climate resilience, Indigenous knowledge, and language revitalisation.

Internationalisation, Theme 1: Perceived Status Hierarchies from Overseas Education

As SINU continues to build awareness nationally and the recognition of their qualifications for increased mobility, students and their families increasingly perceive overseas study as more prestigious. Participants challenged these status-based, hierarchical perceptions where international degrees are seen as superior to local qualifications:

“A lot of Solomon Islanders still give respect to those who studied overseas, especially those with Fulbright or other prestigious scholarships...People [say], ‘my son is on an Australian scholarship or in New Zealand.’ They see themselves as more than those who go to SINU” (P14, Government Employee).

One participant who studied overseas shared:

“Those experiences shaped me differently from those who stayed here. Many in the village look at overseas-educated people with a different status” (P14, Government Employee).

These entrenched hierarchies not only erode the national university's credibility but also worsen the ‘brain drain’. This situation hinders SINU's capacity to achieve the NDS's objectives of fostering national self-reliance and decreasing dependence on foreign aid. As P20 (a University Employee) described, this hierarchy is fundamentally a structural pipeline problem,

“...at this point, you have to leave the country to do your PhD, then decide whether to come back to work here.”

The return of highly skilled individuals, especially in the sciences, is influenced not just by salary but significantly by access to research funding and suitable laboratories, demonstrating the interconnectedness of professional status hierarchies and material resources. International scholarships play a dual role. They are vital for individual professional growth, yet they also act as a mechanism that diverts potential staff away from the SINU and into overseas systems. This situation reveals a misalignment. Efforts to integrate SINU with national development strategies conflict with societal perceptions that associate educational quality with foreignness and distance. Furthermore, international scholarship programs are complex; they build individual capacity, but by reducing the financial burden on the national PSET system, they also inadvertently contribute to the depletion of potential staff from national institutions.

Internationalisation, Theme 2: Donor-Driven Influences Undermining National Autonomy

International priorities have defined competencies in education, creating the basis for much of the regional and national planning frameworks. Additionally, given the significant financial contributions made by external donors to the Solomon Islands education sector, there are concerns about how much those contributions carry with them specific expectations, priorities and so-called ‘best practice’ approaches:

“Planning has been taking place, but we were driven by availability of funds...mostly the plans we have were driven by SDGs and [donor] expectations” (P11, Government Employee).

While SDG4 remains important, there is a risk that external funding schemes and best practice templates may limit relevance and contextualisation. Consequently, national plans can become primarily answerable to external metrics rather than to the needs of Solomon Islanders. One participant challenged University leaders to stop mimicking foreign models and donor-driven priorities that risk displacing national consciousness and culturally grounded planning. Instead, they need to define their institutions' role in "*nation-building*" and "*national consciousness*" (P14, Government Employee).

Internationalisation, Theme 3: Critical Need to Avoid Transactional Partnerships

There were considerable *tok stori* with participants on the motivations and implementations of international partnerships, particularly to ensure that they were not simply for good news stories or perceived 'internationalisation', but that they carried reciprocal benefits, and their activities were curated through participatory methods:

"Partnerships often become transactional...instead of being truly transformational or relational" (P11, Government Employee).

Several participants underscored how deep socialisation and cultural immersion, absent in transactional relationships, are vital to meaningful partnerships:

"If there's not a relationship, then it becomes transactional, not transformational. Tok stori allows ongoing dialogue" (P12, University Employee).

The thesis re-conceptualises *tok stori* not merely as a research methodology but as a practice for negotiating genuine partnerships. This approach provides a framework for enacting the relational ethics underpinning the Solomon Islands' national motto and ensures collaborations are accountable to local priorities and communities.

This focus is validated by concerns, such as those raised by P20 (University Employee), regarding the high number of unimplemented MOUs at SINU. These MOUs, P20 suggests, often serve more as symbolic press releases than as partnerships that deliver concrete benefits to staff, students, or the community. This aligns with the thesis's core argument that internationalisation must be reframed as knowledge diplomacy grounded in Indigenous ethics, moving away from the notion that it is a neutral project of globalisation.

Moreover, the extractive nature of some international research is a critical issue, with P18 (Government Employee) cautioning that "*some of the researchers do not come through us, they come to steal information and go.*" This experience highlights the critique of transactional partnerships, where the problem is not just weak relationships but outright breaches of Indigenous data sovereignty and national authority over research. Such experiences underscore

the necessity for a national research institute and strengthen permitting processes. These are viewed as mechanisms to facilitate ethical, reciprocal collaboration, rather than simple bureaucratic gatekeeping.

Internationalisation, Theme 4: Strategic Internationalisation to Promote Indigenous Epistemology

Despite critiques, some participants recognised the potential to use internationalisation strategically to elevate Indigenous knowledge:

“We can attract international students to come and study about the Solomon Islands...it's a give and take” (P13, University Employee).

One participant called for visionary leadership to:

“operationalise Indigenous values and challenge neoliberal norms” (P15, University Employee).

Participants emphasised the curriculum as a critical site for engagement:

“It is when we translate into curriculum that we try to blend our own expectations” (P15, University Employee).

Tok stori was conceived as a way to establish a "middle ground" (P13, University Employee), facilitating the integration of Indigenous and international epistemologies and cultivating a "common ground for national universities" (P13, University Employee). In this framework, internationalisation serves as a mechanism for asserting the Solomon Islands' intellectual leadership. This can be achieved by leveraging internationalisation through initiatives, such as the proposed Solomon Islands Language Centre and Centre for Islands' Futures, grounding them in the Solomon Islands' distinct positionality and worldview.

This strategic approach to internationalisation aligns directly with the SINU–NDS mapping discussed earlier in this chapter. By leveraging international partnerships, it simultaneously supports key national objectives, including climate resilience, cultural preservation, and human resource development, while resisting the pressure to uncritically adopt global rankings or policies. It also reinforces the thesis's claim that national universities in Moana Oceania can function as sites of epistemic contestation and innovation, not just adaptation.

Research Significance and Implications

The Solomon Islands case study illustrates the tensions and possibilities of higher education in Moana Oceania. National universities, like SINU, are positioned at the nexus of service to local

communities, engagement with regional frameworks, and responsiveness to international agendas. Participants' narratives reveal both the constraints of systemic inequities, donor dependency, and colonial legacies, and the transformative potential of culturally grounded curricula, relational ethics, and epistemic sovereignty. The themes identified in the Solomon Islands' case study are relationally interpreted understandings shaped through dialogues, accountability, and contexts.

This case study illustrates how the alignment between SINU's Strategic Plan and the NDS is actively experienced, negotiated, and challenged in practice, beyond mere priority mapping. SINU is a crucial body for implementing NDS goals, particularly those related to human resource development, fair access to education, resilience, and good governance. Nevertheless, contributors noted that this work is invariably constrained by factors such as limited resources, historical issues, and the pervasive global academic mindset.

For the wider Moana Oceania, this case demonstrates the necessity of reframing higher education not simply as a mechanism for economic growth or global competitiveness, but as a relational institution with responsibilities to sustain culture, foster resilience, and serve as a “*malamute*”, or sheltering place, for community wellbeing (P15, University Employee). The implications extend to educational policy, leadership development, and research practices, underscoring that decolonial and relational approaches are essential if national universities are to fulfil their mandates and if strategic plans like the NDS are to be realised in ways that privilege Indigenous priorities and epistemologies.

Reflections on Research in the Solomon Islands

Tok stori proved central, both as a method and as an epistemology. Rather than a one-way process of data collection, *tok stori* created a dialogic space in which narratives unfolded relationally and knowledge was co-created. Returning transcripts and thematic analyses to participants was not only a matter of validation but an ethical act of respect. Participants' feedback reshaped interpretations, ensuring that research outcomes were not detached from lived realities and that the SINU-NDS alignment remained accountable to those working within the system.

This process underscored that research legitimacy in the Solomon Islands is measured not solely by methodological rigour, but by cultural resonance, humility, and trust. Collaborative

sensemaking foregrounded participants as co-analysts rather than informants and challenged extractive paradigms in which external researchers interpret Moana Oceania policy landscapes from a distance. In doing so, the case affirms Indigenous epistemologies as central to higher education research. It demonstrates how *tok stori* can inform not only knowledge production, but also institutional governance and partnership practices.

Emerging and Continuing Priorities

SINU is actively negotiating their mandate to meet national priorities while balancing regional expectations and global academic norms. Framed by the themes presented above, the study used *tok stori* to privilege local voices and ways of knowing, being, and doing. Several priorities emerged strongly from participants' narratives. A priority is the development of curricula anchored in Indigenous knowledges. Courses such as Solomon Islands Studies were described as a “*corrective*” (P13, University Employee) to colonial curricula, restoring ecological knowledge, resilience practices, and local histories that had previously been marginalised. Participants saw such initiatives as key to advancing epistemic sovereignty and to realising NDS objectives concerning resilience, sustainable development and the preservation of culture. A second priority concerns universities as spaces of service and leadership. The ethic of care embedded in chiefly responsibilities shapes expectations that SINU could function as a “*malamute*” (P15, University Employee), sheltering and uplifting communities rather than operating solely as a qualifications-granting institution. Participants directly linked this ethic to the national motto, 'To lead is to serve.' They stressed that the ultimate measure of academic development, research, and partnerships should be their demonstrable contribution to improving the quality of life for Solomon Islanders, especially those residing in rural and outer-island communities.

Thirdly, community relevance emerged as the primary measure of ‘quality’. Education was described as effective only when it improves livelihoods and village life, rather than when it reproduces donor-driven or externally imposed agendas. This priority highlights the importance of incorporating vernacular languages and developing curricula and pathways that are meaningful for youth. These programs should directly link to livelihoods, acknowledging the reality of limited wage employment, the prevalence of subsistence economies, and mobility schemes. Consequently, community relevance serves as a practical measure to determine if the alignment between SINU and the NDS is truly translating into valuable changes that benefit all Solomon Islanders.

Finally, participants emphasised the ongoing work of balancing regional and global pressures. Institutions such as SINU must engage with PacREF, USP, SDG4 and donor priorities, but participants stressed that such engagements should not displace national specificity or the integrity of Indigenous values. The Solomon Islands face the challenge of maintaining their "*excellently unique*" identity (P14, Government Employee) while aligning it with their specific national context. This must be achieved while engaging with regional and international frameworks based on relational and reciprocal terms, moving beyond a focus solely on compliance. These priorities point to the dual task of strengthening national identity and sovereignty while strategically navigating global and regional imperatives.

Challenges

Through *tok stori*, participants highlighted systemic and persistent challenges that constrain SINU's capacity to realise these priorities. Inequitable access remains a central concern. Rural and provincial students often face linguistic, infrastructural and curricular disadvantages compared to their urban peers. The potential of the PSET system to be genuinely national is undermined by the uneven schooling experiences reported by participants. These disparities, often rooted in limited or under-resourced secondary provision, led to practical difficulties in pursuing further study and struggles with English-medium academic writing upon arriving at university.

A further challenge arises from entrenched status hierarchies that privilege overseas qualifications over SINU degrees. The preference for studying in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, or other overseas institutions over the national university is driven by a perception of greater prestige within families and communities. This sentiment erodes the SINU's legitimacy, contributes to brain drain, and contradicts the NDS's goals of building national capacity and reducing reliance on foreign aid. Consequently, efforts to enhance local educational programs, particularly those addressing national human resource needs, are hampered, as top students continue to equate quality with international, distant qualifications and actively pursue various overseas scholarship opportunities.

Participants also pointed to donor dependency as a structural challenge. Educational planning is frequently shaped by the availability of external funding, tied to the SDGs or other regional or global benchmarks. While such funding is vital in a resource-constrained environment, it can shift accountability upwards to donors rather than outwards to communities. This is

compounded by institutional constraints within SINU and across the PSET sector, including under-resourced faculties, infrastructure gaps and uneven quality assurance across providers. These conditions limit institutions' capacity to deliver on their mandates, even when policy frameworks and strategic plans are well aligned.

Finally, colonial legacies continue to cast a long shadow. Curricula, governance frameworks and quality benchmarks still carry traces of externally imposed priorities that slow decolonial reforms. Participants' emphasis on Indigenous knowledge, relational ethics, and community relevance underscores the extent of work that remains to be done to reorient higher education around locally defined criteria of value. These challenges reveal how structural inequities and dependency dynamics restrict the full realisation of a nationally relevant higher education system, despite the perceived alignment between SINU and NDS.

Opportunities

Despite these challenges, the Solomon Islands case study highlights opportunities for transformation. Through collaborative sensemaking, it became clear that the Solomon Islands case study demonstrates that national universities are not merely sites of knowledge transmission but spaces of negotiation, where cultural identity, political autonomy, and global pressures are actively contested and reimagined. One opportunity lies in further leveraging *tok stori* for governance and pedagogy. As both epistemology and method, *tok stori* offers a relational framework for leadership, curriculum design and partnership-building, enabling decision-making processes that are dialogic, accountable and culturally grounded.

A second opportunity concerns reframing internationalisation. Rather than replicating patterns of dependency, participants envisaged an approach to internationalisation that strategically promotes Indigenous epistemologies, attracts international students to learn from Solomon Islands' knowledges and showcases Solomon Islands' knowledge globally. Emerging initiatives highlight this reframing, such as the Solomon Islands Language Centre (SILC) to serve as a "...national hub for documenting, preserving, promoting, and celebrating the country's diverse linguistic heritage...including collaborative research, resource development, community training, and policy engagement" (SINU, 2025d). This demonstrates the potential of international partnerships to elevate Indigenous knowledge, serving as a powerful platform for achieving epistemic sovereignty and advancing knowledge diplomacy.

Regional solidarity grounded in *wansolwara* presents a further opportunity. When regional cooperation is framed through shared cultural frameworks, there is greater scope for mutual benefit, local adaptation and co-authored solutions to shared challenges. A deeper vision, rooted in reciprocity, shared histories, and collaborative problem-solving, underlies participants' critiques of USP and other regional initiatives.

Finally, the case study points to the possibility of deepening epistemic sovereignty by embedding ecological knowledge, disaster resilience and community livelihoods within curricula across disciplines. Graduates prepared by such a curriculum will be equipped for national service and collective resilience. They will also be ready to participate in global discussions on climate, sustainability, and development. Within the NDS, SINU is particularly well positioned to advance medium-term strategies, such as “ensur[ing] all Solomon Islanders can access quality education, and the nation’s manpower needs are sustainably met” (p.13) precisely because it can integrate these epistemic and development priorities in locally grounded ways (SIG, 2016).

Research Futures

Looking ahead, the Solomon Islands case study points to several directions for future research on higher education in Moana Oceania. There is a need for a deeper examination of *tok stori* as both a methodology, a model of governance and a pedagogy. Further research could investigate how *tok stori* might inform institutional governance practices, classroom teaching, assessment and community engagement, and how it might intersect with other Indigenous methodologies across Moana Oceania. In parallel, longitudinal studies of curricular reforms would help trace how efforts to centre Indigenous knowledge (e.g., the Solomon Islands Studies course, the Solomon Islands Language Centre, etc.) reshape student learning, community engagement, and national development over time.

Participants' reflections also highlight the importance of research on youth aspirations, labour emigration, and educational mobility. Future studies could examine how young Solomon Islanders negotiate choices among SINU, overseas scholarships, and labour migration schemes, and how these decisions interact with family expectations, gender norms, rural-urban disparities, and perceptions of institutional status. Policies aimed at supporting community wellbeing and enhancing national capacity-building could be informed by this research, particularly in aligning mobility pathways.

Finally, there is scope to investigate leadership and critical consciousness within higher education. Research exploring how leaders at SINU and within government draw on relational ethics, *kastom* and decolonial thinking to resist neoliberal pressures and advance epistemic sovereignty would extend the insights of this case. The Solomon Islands case study presents national universities not only as institutions of higher learning but also as sites of cultural negotiation and epistemic contestation. Future research must continue to privilege Indigenous voices and relational ethics, ensuring that higher education in Moana Oceania evolves in ways that sustain both community livelihoods and national sovereignty.

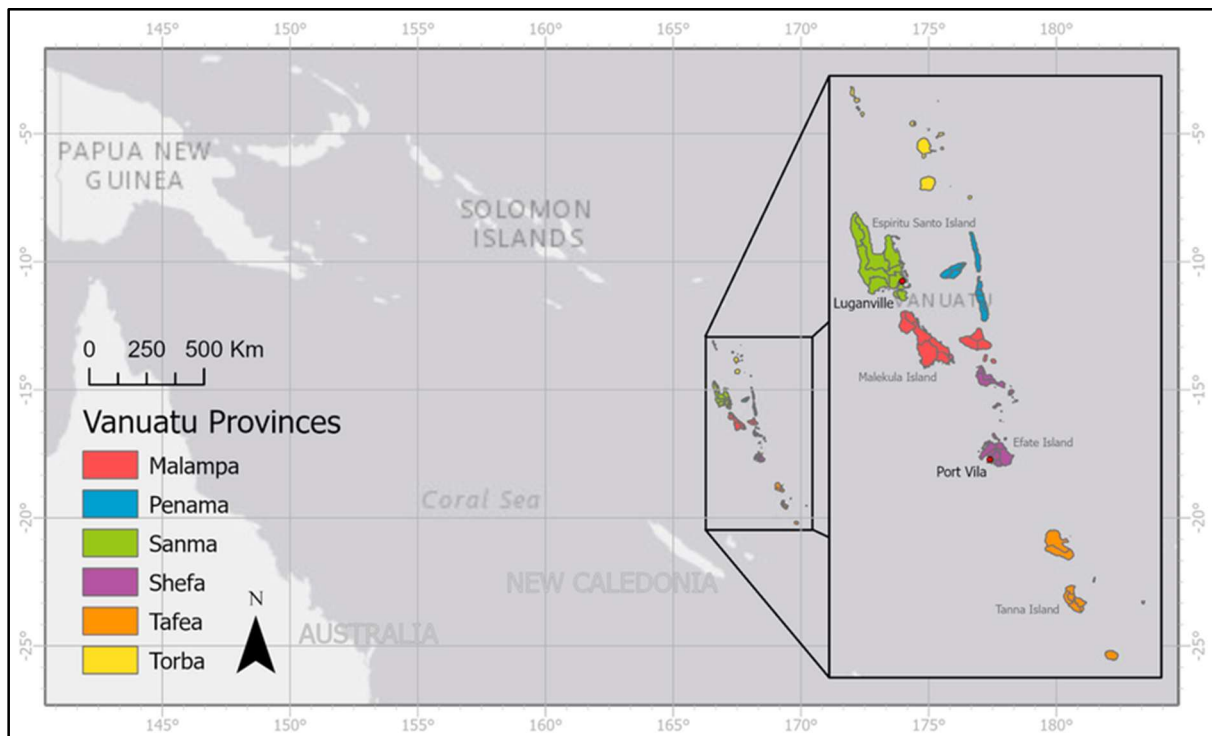
Chapter 7. Case Study: Republic of Vanuatu

The Contexts

Vanuatu is an archipelago of 83 islands, about 65 of which are inhabited, stretching across the South Pacific between Australia, Fiji, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia (see map in Figure 10 below). Port Vila, on Efate, serves as the national capital and economic hub, with another notably large town, Luganville, on the nation’s largest island, Espiritu Santo (RoV, 2025). The nation is marked by profound cultural and linguistic diversity, environmental vulnerabilities, and a socio-economic profile shaped by subsistence livelihoods, aid dependency, and labour migration. This section outlines the demographic, socio-economic, environmental, and political-institutional contexts that frame the National University of Vanuatu (NUV) and its navigation of local, regional, and global priorities.

Figure 10.

Map of Vanuatu, with Provinces Labelled



Source: Do et al., 2024

Demographic Contexts

Vanuatu's 2025 population is estimated at approximately 332,000, with around 20% of the population residing in the two urban areas - Port Vila (~42,000) & Luganville (~21,000) (VNSO, 2025). The median age is youthful, approximately 20 years old (slightly higher at 23 in urban centres), with 60% under 25, reflecting a substantial young demographic (UN-Habitat, 2025). Like many other nations of Moana Oceania, the majority (approximately 80%) live in rural areas, engaged in subsistence agriculture and fishing (VNSO, 2025). Urbanisation is increasing, particularly in Port Vila and Luganville, but remains relatively low (RoV, 2025).

Christianity is the dominant faith, with Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, and Seventh-day Adventist denominations the most prominent. Churches are integral providers of education, health, and social services, and exercise considerable moral authority (RoV, 2025).

The population is more than 98% *ni-Vanuatu*, with small percentages of people of European or mixed heritage, and language diversity. Business and education systems are organised predominantly as bilingual English & French, with a rising inclusion of Bislama (all three are official languages) (RoV, 2025). *Ni-Vanuatu* society is grounded in *kastom*, which shapes governance, land tenure (98% of land is held under customary ownership), kinship relations, and obligations of reciprocity. The ethos of communal resilience and relationality remains central (IOM, 2025).

Socio-Economic Contexts

In 2020, Vanuatu graduated from the UN classification of a Least Developed Country (LDC), a significant milestone for the country and only the sixth country in the world to do so (UN, 2020). The World Bank ranks Vanuatu as a Lower-Middle Income Country (LMIC) (WB, 2025h). However, the classification does not adequately account for the contextual realities of its small, aid-dependent economy, which is highly vulnerable to shocks, potentially leading to misrepresentation of poverty levels.

As of 2024, the working age (15 years+) population totals approximately 184,200, with a participation rate of 42.9% (Women: 37.9% & Men: 47.9%). Agriculture, hospitality, tourism, and services are the most significant employment sectors (ILO, 2024). Critical labour issues include skill shortages in trades, administration, education, and hospitality roles; high staff turnover; evolving business needs; and insufficient qualifications (VSP, 2024). Formal

employment opportunities are limited. Approximately 20% of the workforce is in the formal sector. Unemployment and underemployment, especially for youth, are persistent challenges. Seasonal Worker Programmes (SWP/RSE) in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand provide both opportunities and risks, as households become reliant on remittances. At the same time, skilled labour is drawn away from local communities (MFAICET, 2024). Many households (~65%) rely on subsistence agriculture and informal markets (RoV, 2025). Income generation is concentrated in urban areas and from remittances, with seasonal labour mobility schemes in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand becoming a growing source. Aid flows and remittances are also significant (Lowy Institute, 2024). GDP is estimated at around USD 1.1 billion (2023), with agriculture (copra, kava, cocoa, coffee), fisheries, and tourism as major contributors. (WB, 2025g).

Environmental Contexts

Vanuatu is consistently ranked amongst the world's most disaster-prone countries. However, although it was ranked #1 globally in 2014 due to its high exposure to cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic activity, tsunamis, and sea-level rise (UNU, 2014), in 2024 it moved to #48 due to the country's risk management and adaptation strategies, planning, coping and adaptive capacities (BEH/IFHV, 2023). Cyclones and earthquakes devastate infrastructure, livelihoods, and education systems. Vanuatu's low-lying islands make it particularly vulnerable to tectonic and climatic events. A 7.3-magnitude earthquake in December 2024 caused extensive damage and disruption, especially in Port Vila, destroying buildings, displacing over 1,000 residents, and resulting in 14 fatalities (NDMO, 2025). These environmental vulnerabilities shape national planning and underscore the importance of climate resilience, sustainable resource management, and disaster preparedness, priorities that are being integrated into the education sector-wide.

Political-Institutional Contexts

Chiefly systems and kastom continue to exert strong authority, particularly at the community level (Nimbtik, 2020). Customary land tenure underpins development, constraining and enabling education expansion (IOM, 2025). Churches hold social and political authority, shaping the delivery of education and moral frameworks (Lavender Forsyth & Atkinson, 2024). They remain central partners in PSET provision (VQA, 2025a). As a member of the Commonwealth, Vanuatu draws on shared institutional frameworks, particularly in

parliamentary democracy and education structures, though always mediated through *kastom* (IOM, 2025). Independence was achieved in 1980 (RoV, 2025). The Westminster model of parliamentary government is often marked by political instability, with frequent changes in government (Lavender Forsyth & Atkinson, 2024). Despite capacity constraints and geographic dispersal, the government has articulated clear priorities through *Vanuatu 2030: The People's Plan* (the National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP) 2016-2030) (RoV, 2016).

Education Sector Contexts

Vanuatu's education system reflects its geographic dispersion and remarkable linguistic diversity, with over a hundred Indigenous languages. The formal system comprises ECCE, primary (Years 1-6), junior secondary (Years 7-10), senior secondary (Years 11-13), and Post-School Education and Training (PSET), which are governed by the Education Act and the Vanuatu Qualifications Act (RoV, 2014a, 2014b). As of 2024, the adult literacy rate (age 15+) was 87.96%, down from 92.75% in 2019 (UNESCO, 2025a). Student progression through the system remains challenged by financial and logistical barriers, as well as the bilingual English-French language policy, which begins instruction in local languages during early years before transitioning to one of the official languages (DFAT, 2020). The initial years of schooling (Years 1 and 2) are delivered in local vernacular languages, after which the medium of instruction shifts predominantly to English or French from Year 3 onwards (MoET, 2019). This transition requires children to simultaneously acquire literacy skills and develop proficiency in English, creating a significant linguistic and pedagogical challenge (Willans, 2013b). Despite the introduction of a national literacy strategy designed to address these issues, the 2021 Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) found 79% of Year 4 learners did not meet the minimum literacy benchmarks (SPC, 2021b).

The MoET centrally oversees ECCE through to secondary education, with implementation supported by provincial offices and faith-based school providers (MoET, 2019). The Vanuatu Qualifications Authority (VQA) regulates PSET through provider registration, quality assurance, and sector articulation (RoV, 2014a). The Vanuatu Education Sector Training Strategy (VETSS) 2020-2030 provides the current strategic framework, though coordination among MoET, VQA, and non-state actors remains fragmented (MoET, 2019). In 2023, education expenditure accounted for approximately 10.6% of GDP and 20.9% of total government spending (UNESCO, 2025a). Funding for PSET remains insufficient, creating greater reliance on development partners (VSP, 2024).

Gender parity, while achieved at the primary level, declines in secondary education due to economic obligations, while girls face dropout risks from early childbearing and limited re-entry pathways (UNESCO, 2025a). Geographic disparities persist, with rural and outer-island schools facing infrastructure and staffing challenges. Inclusive education remains under-resourced, with many teachers lacking training, and students with disabilities, particularly those with severe impairments, often excluded. The government launched a new Inclusive Education and Training Policy 2025-2030, building on prior frameworks and consultations with disability rights stakeholders (Hlatywayo et al., 2025).

Post-School Education & Training (PSET) in Vanuatu

The VQA defines PSET broadly to include structured education beyond early childhood, primary, and secondary phases, across formal and non-formal domains, including vocational, religious, and workplace-based learning (VQA, 2025a). PSET providers must be registered and adhere to rigorous standards for organisational stability, staff, resources, and systems (VQA, 2025c).

Development of PSET in Vanuatu

The trajectory of Post-School Education and Training (PSET) in Vanuatu reflects ongoing system strengthening through reforms. Vanuatu PSET has moved from a missionary-led, decentralised provision to a nationally coordinated, bilingual system with dedicated quality assurance and an emerging national university. Across phases, reform has centred on system coherence, labour-market relevance, and equity for learners across dispersed islands.

Colonial and Missionary Provision (1850s - 1979)

During the Anglo-French colonial periods, PSET opportunities were limited and fragmented. Missionary institutions were the earliest providers, with theological colleges and teacher training schools forming the backbone of post-school education (Tahi, 1988). The dual colonial system shaped provision. English-speaking *ni-Vanuatu* were channelled into Commonwealth universities and training colleges, while Francophone students accessed scholarships in France and New Caledonia. This bifurcation created parallel streams in teacher education, technical training, and professional pathways, with little national coordination (Miles, 1998). However, this dual heritage set the stage for today's bilingual (English-French) policy framework and later government efforts to build a national higher education architecture (Willans, 2014). In

1963, the government opened the Kawenu Teacher College, with support from the British administration. This was the first opportunity for teacher education based in-country (Tahi, 1988). The Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT), established in 1970 by the French Government, became the country's flagship bilingual vocational provider (beginning in 1980), offering training in trades and business (VIT, 2021).

Nation-Building and Early Institutions (1980-1994)

Independence in 1980 brought prioritisation of human resource development, formalised in Vanuatu's initial fifteen-year National Development Plan, with phase one between 1982-1986 primarily focusing on the education sector (ADB, 1985). Scholarship schemes, heavily supported by bilateral partners, expanded opportunities for *ni-Vanuatu* to pursue tertiary education overseas. Additionally, the establishment of the USP Centre expanded opportunities for *ni-Vanuatu* to “enjoy more of the rights and privileges that the University was established for” (Tahi, 1988, p.327). Despite these efforts, provision remained concentrated in Port Vila and Luganville, leaving rural and outer-island communities underserved (UNICEF, 2017).

Expansion and Diversification (1995-2010)

The mid-1990s and 2000s saw a gradual expansion of PSET provision. The Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education (VITE) was established in 2001 to address critical teacher shortages (MoET, 2020). The Vanuatu Agricultural College (VAC) was established in 2005 in Santo to meet the demand for agricultural and agri-business training, reflecting the sector's role as the backbone of the economy (RoV, 2006). VIT expanded into hospitality and tourism, while non-government organisations and church providers introduced community-based vocational programmes. However, provision remained fragmented, with no overarching qualifications framework, resulting in varied quality and limited mobility of skills. National policies, such as the Education Master Plan 1997-2006, acknowledged the importance of PSET but lacked mechanisms for coherence and quality assurance (MoET, 1999).

System Building and Quality Assurance (2011-2019)

A critical turning point came with the Vanuatu Qualifications Authority Act No. 1 of 2014, which established the VQA as the statutory body responsible for quality assurance, provider registration, and accreditation of qualifications (RoV, 2014a). This period also saw the first PSET Policy 2016-2020, which articulated a vision for an inclusive, demand-driven system

linked to Vanuatu's National Sustainable Development Plan (MoET, 2016; RoV, 2016). Alignment with the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF) strengthened regional comparability of qualifications, while national efforts focused on building institutional management capacity and piloting Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) schemes (MoET, 2017; VQA, 2017).

Strategic Reform and Resilience (2020 - present)

The Vanuatu Education and Training Sector Strategy (VETSS) 2020-2030 signalled a shift towards strategic reform, with emphasis on equity, quality, and resilience (MoET, 2019). Partnerships with the Australia-funded Vanuatu Skills Partnership decentralised PSET delivery through provincial skills centres, embedding training in priority sectors such as agriculture, tourism, construction, and climate adaptation (VSP, 2024). ICT, entrepreneurship, and disaster preparedness have emerged as new focus areas, reflecting both global shifts and national priorities. The COVID-19 global pandemic and recurring national disasters underscored the importance of flexible, community-based provision and strong quality assurance mechanisms. Looking forward, PSET in Vanuatu aims to broaden access for women, youth, and learners with disabilities, while deepening integration with labour market needs and national development goals. The National University of Vanuatu (NUV) was established by Act No. 34 of 2019 (commencing 24 January 2020) as a bilingual (French/English) university with a Council and a Senate, and with a purpose to provide higher education and lifelong learning through teaching, research, and international cooperation in both English and French. The Act lists initial Faculties (Humanities, Science & Technology) and Schools, including Education, Tourism and Business, Public Administration, Policy and Security, Science, Agriculture, Maritime, Engineering and Technology, and Medicine and Nursing. NUV's 2021-2030 Strategic Plan aligns with the Vanuatu Education & Training Sector Strategy (VETSS) 2020-2030 and the NSDP (People's Plan 2030) (NUV, 2021; RoV, 2016, 2020). Governance has progressed with the appointment of the inaugural Vice-Chancellor and the establishment of Council/Senate (NUV, 2021; RoV, 2020).

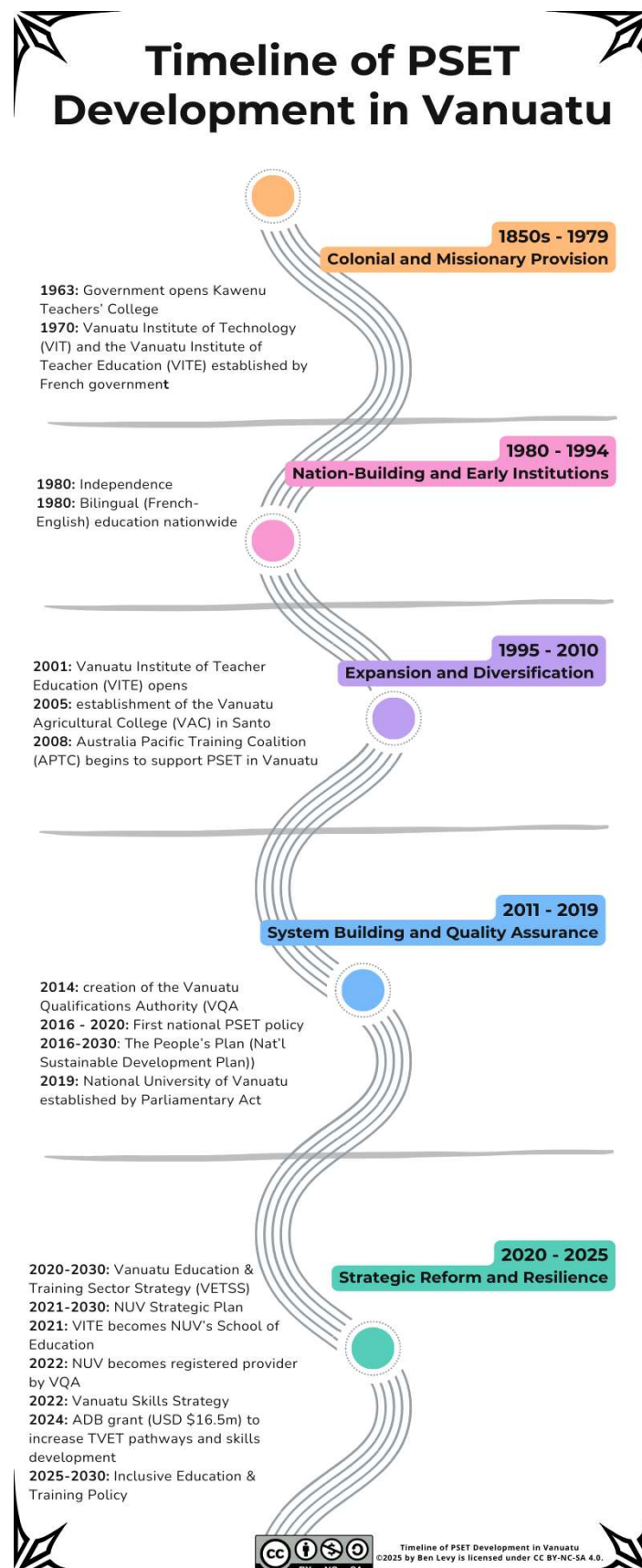
To accelerate skills for employment, especially for women, disengaged youth and people with disabilities, ADB and the Government of Vanuatu signed a USD \$16.5 million grant for the "Supporting the Delivery of Skills Development" project. Implemented with the MoET through VIT, the project expands infrastructure and equipment at two campuses (including Malampa), introduces new courses, strengthens trainers, and pilots targeted inclusion measures (ADB,

2024, 2025a). The Japan Fund for Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific (JFPR) contributed an additional USD \$3 million. ADB's 2024 country fact-sheet notes this commitment with VIT (ADB, 2025b). These investments dovetail with VETSS 2020-2030 priorities on access, quality, and resilience, as well as with ongoing localisation efforts through provincial skills centres (VSP, 2024).

With VQA's system-level quality assurance framework, NUV's bilingual mandate and faculty architecture, and ADB-backed expansion of TVET pathways, Vanuatu's PSET is transitioning from fragmented provision to a more coherent, ladder system (school to TVET to University pathways), greater geographic reach, and clearer quality signals for employers. Sustained attention to inclusion (women, learners with disabilities, rural/outer islands), disaster resilience, and labour-market alignment will be central to realising the promise of these reforms (MoET, 2019).

Figure 11.

PSET Development Timeline for Vanuatu



Overview of PSET in Vanuatu

PSET in Vanuatu encompasses a diverse range of educational providers. It includes tertiary-level education, technical and vocational training, theological colleges, workplace and in-place training, and non-formal education in communities. This diversity reflects national pathways and locally driven initiatives that respond to Vanuatu's unique socio-economic and cultural contexts. As of 2021, the Vanuatu Qualifications Authority (VQA) provides a structured framework for provider registration, programme accreditation, and alignment of qualifications to the Vanuatu and Pacific Qualifications Frameworks (SPC, 2015; VQA, 2017). PSET programmes in Vanuatu are delivered by multiple provider types, with a firm emphasis on vocational training qualifications:

- **Higher Education:** NUV delivers a growing number of degree-level programmes across arts, sciences, and education, the majority through international joint degree programmes. As they slowly consolidate existing national PSET providers under the NUV umbrella, the diversity and breadth of their programmes will increase (NUV, 2021). The University of the South Pacific (USP) has its Emalus campus in Port Vila, and four small centres in the provinces of Torba, Samna, Malampa and Tafea. Enrolled students at USP have access to the full range of USP qualifications, but the Emalus campus is also home to the USP School of Law and Social Science, and hosts a Confucius Institute (USP, 2025b).
- **TVET:** Since 2003, rural training centres (RTCs), coordinated through the Vanuatu Rural Development and Training Centres Association (VRDCTA), are “vocational based schools designed for young people who have been pushed out of the formal educational system and provides them with training in specific skills to improve the quality of life in rural areas”, now approximately 50 across all provinces (MoET, 2025). VIT offers training in trades, agriculture, tourism, hospitality, computing, and mechanical disciplines (VIT, 2021).
- **Religious Institutions:** theological colleges and church-affiliated training centres
- **Workplace/Industry/Public Service:** employer-led (e.g. apprenticeships) or in-service training, often linked to sector-specific needs (e.g. tourism, mechanical trades, health)

- ***Non-formal:*** NGOs and community initiatives offer literacy, livelihoods, and life-skills training, often targeting women, youth, and people with disabilities (VQA, 2025a).

Donor-supported organisations, such as the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC), also play prominent roles in providing accredited programmes, workplace-oriented training, and institutional capacity building (APTC, 2019). Partnerships such as the Vanuatu Skills Partnership further link skills development to provincial economic growth, community resilience, and inclusive development (VSP, 2024).

The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) oversees the education sector, guided by the National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP 2016-2030) and the Vanuatu Education and Training Sector Strategy (VETSS 2020-2030) (MoET, 2019; RoV, 2016). These prioritise equitable access, quality improvement, and stronger PSET pathways (MoET, 2020; RoV, 2016). The Vanuatu Qualifications Authority (VQA), established in 2014, regulates PSET providers, accredits programmes, and aligns national qualifications with the Pacific Qualifications Framework (VQA, 2014). This governance structure provides national benchmarks for recognition of learning, although institutional capacity and resourcing remain uneven across urban and rural contexts. At the time of writing this document, registered PSET providers (VQA, 2025b) in Vanuatu are:

- Bethania Theological Training Centre
- Fulton Adventist University College
- Gateway Institute
- Korvan Community Health School
- Napil Agriculture Training Centre
- National University of Vanuatu (NUV)
- Saint Michel Catholic Technical College
- TAFE Queensland International Education Pty Ltd
- Talua Theological Training Institute
- University of the South Pacific (USP)
- Vaiduhu Vocational Training Centre
- *Vanuatu Agriculture College
- *Vanuatu College of Nursing Education
- *Vanuatu Institute of Technology
- Vetimboso Vocational Training Centre

Those with an asterisk () are yet to be consolidated into NUV.*

PSET financing in Vanuatu is derived from a mix of government allocations, donor support, and private or church contributions. MoET provides funding to NUV and some TVET providers. For example, in the budget year 2023, the total PSET sub-sector budget was VUV 2,005,007,138 (~USD 16.8 million), or 19.7% of the total education sector budget (MoET, 2023). Development partners such as the World Bank, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand contribute significantly through budget support, scholarships, and institutional partnerships. In 2022, for example, Australia was the largest donor in the education sector (70%), with total spending of \$21.4 million USD (Lowy Institute, 2024). Churches and NGOs sustain several theological colleges and training centres, often through voluntary support. Some providers charge private fees, but affordability remains a barrier for many students. Donor programmes such as the Vanuatu Skills Partnership act as critical mechanisms for ensuring outreach to rural and provincial populations and linking skills development with labour-market demands (VSP, 2024).

Vanuatu's recent reform-focused policies, as follows, have significantly strengthened the PSET sub-sector's coordination, strategic direction, efficiency and financing:

- The **Vanuatu Qualifications Authority Act 2014** provides the legal foundation for regulation, accreditation, provider registration, and recognition of prior/non-formal learning (RoV, 2014a).
- The **Post Secondary Education & Training (PSET) Policy 2016-2020** strives to improve the quality and access of PSET education while also strengthening its alignment to national labour needs (MoET, 2016).
- Policy on the **Vanuatu Qualifications Framework (VQF)** establishes the national system of qualification levels, matching skills and competencies with qualifications. In so doing, the VQF establishes a quality assurance framework that not only strengthens the national structure but also enables greater mobility for graduates beyond their borders (VQA, 2017).
- **VETSS 2020-2030** was developed to align with and respond to the strategic direction of the NSDP 2016-2030, with attention to teacher quality, inclusive education, infrastructure, curriculum, minimum standards, monitoring and evaluation, governance, and partnerships (MoET, 2019).
- **National Human Resource Development Plan (NHRDP) 2020-2030** was designed with the “purpose...to guide investment in Post-School Education and Training (PSET)

to ensure available PSET resources are more efficiently and effectively used” (RoV, 2019).

- **National University of Vanuatu Act No. 34 of 2019** was the legislation that officially established NUV, and outlined the governance, structure, purpose and commitments (RoV, 2020).

However, full policy implementation and MERL (monitoring, evaluation, reporting & learning) are constrained by limited data availability, funding constraints, challenges in serving dispersed populations, and varied institutional capacities. Capacity constraints in human resources remain a significant challenge. Many RTCs rely on trainers with limited formal qualifications, and professional development opportunities are largely donor-dependent. Gender imbalances persist, with fewer women represented in technical teaching roles. Initiatives through APTC and MoET aim to upskill educators in pedagogy, digital competencies, and leadership, but consistent national strategies are still emerging.

Data on PSET enrolments is largely unavailable. In fact, the MoET stated that “The Ministry is not able to access basic data from most PSET providers, so it is impossible to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of individual providers or of the sector as a whole” (MoET, 2019, p.25). According to the VETSS document (MoET, 2019), PSET enrolments for 2018 were 2,055; however, there is no accompanying definition of which data are included and which are excluded in this figure (e.g., registered/unregistered providers, accredited/non-accredited courses, full-time/part-time, etc.). Additionally, when reviewing the data tables from the MoET Statistical Digest 2016-2018 (MoET, 2018), various calculation errors were revealed in the PSET data. Available data on PSET enrolments for 2019-2021 was incomplete, limited to the USP-Emalus campus, NUV, and the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), and therefore does not include all VQA-registered providers. Enrolments revealed for 2021 indicated 308 students at NUV plus 195 students at the Vanuatu Institute of Education (recently merged into NUV), 2,736 students at the Emalus campus of USP, and 115 students at AUF...for a total of 3354 enrolled PSET students in 2021. An additional 2,422 students were enrolled in accredited or non-accredited courses at unregistered PSET institutions (MoET, 2021a). Demand outstrips supply, particularly at advanced qualification levels. Urban youth are more likely to transition into PSET, while rural and outer-island learners face barriers of cost, distance, and language. Gender parity has improved in many vocational fields, though disparities remain in higher-level qualifications and traditionally male-dominated trades

(APTC, 2019). Although the MoET has recommended that a “PSET module within Open VEMIS [(Vanuatu Education Management Information System)] is likely to meet the need for accessible data” (MoET, 2019, p. 25), at the time of writing this study, there remains no such module in the VEMIS.

Pathways to PSET

Learners progress from secondary education into higher and vocational training, apprenticeships, theological studies, or workplace-based in-service training. Pathways are now more clearly formalised via the Vanuatu Qualifications Framework (VQF), which supports recognition and articulation across pathways (VQA, 2017). Capabilities are being enhanced through APTC and other provider-led training in technical, leadership, digital literacy, and workplace skills (APTC, 2019). The VQF supports articulation and recognition across these pathways, allowing learners to move from lower-level certificates to higher qualifications. Recognition of prior learning and alignment of the VQF to the PQF have enhanced mobility, especially for adult learners (VQA, 2014).

Secondary school completion rates remain low, with many exiting the system before beginning upper secondary. With only 14% of appropriately aged students completing secondary school in 2023 (see Table 10 below), the transition to PSET is uneven, with urban learners having more opportunities than their rural peers. Expansion of pathways to TVET for school dropouts, RTCs, and provincial training centres aims to address these gaps, though disparities remain.

Table 10.

% of Children of the Relevant Age Groups for the Education Level in Vanuatu, 2023

	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary
School Net Attendance	91%	52%	26%
School Completion	81%	45%	14%
Out-of-School Children	7%	16%	46%

Source: UNICEF, 2024c

Scholarships from government donors (e.g. Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand) support Vanuatu students for regional or international study. While these contribute to human resource

development and the building of the national workforce, concerns about brain drain remain. Vanuatu government scholarships are also available and account for most scholarship recipients, supporting both domestic and international qualifications (MoET, 2021a). However, questions have been raised about the selection criteria (see Table 11 below).

Table 11.

Sponsored PSET Scholarships or Loans for 2021, by Donor

	New Awarded	Ongoing	Total
Republic of Vanuatu	355	465	820
Vanuatu National Provident Fund (VNPF) - Loan³⁶	461	361	822
Aotearoa New Zealand	35	69	104
France	2	29	31
Australia	0	0	0
TOTAL	853	924	1777

Adapted from: MoET, 2021a

PSET Completions

Data are limited, with 2020 revealing PSET completion rates of 5.2% (female) and 7.7% (male) (WB, 2025g). No additional data prior to or after this data can be located. Attrition remains a challenge, driven by financial pressures and gaps in academic preparedness. Foreign Government Scholarship recipients often record higher completion rates, supported by the structured mentoring and support systems available abroad.

³⁶ The Student Education Support Scheme (SESS), coordinated by the Vanuatu National Provident Fund (VNPF) is a tertiary education loan to the student and requires a VNPF client (e.g. parent, etc.) as guarantor. More details: <https://www.vnpf.com.vu/student-education-support-scheme-sess.html>. (VNPF, 2025).

National University of Vanuatu

NUV was formally established in 2019 and is designed to consolidate existing institutions such as the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education, Vanuatu Institute of Technology, Vanuatu Agriculture College, and develop new and innovative academic programmes. It represents a significant step in national capacity building and autonomy in higher education. NUV serves as the premier higher education institution, registered with VQA and offering university-level PSET credentials. It plays a central role in advancing degree-level PSET aligned with national human resource priorities. NUV aspires to be a leading institution for culturally grounded, nationally relevant, and internationally recognised higher education, contributing to sustainable development, resilience, and nation-building. It distinguishes itself as a fully bilingual (French-English) national university where students can earn any qualification in either language of instruction. The growing leadership, academic and professional team of NUV recognises the journey ahead and is working with intention and strategy to strengthen relevance and institutional sustainability. Within a brief period of establishment, they launched a 10-year strategic plan, outlining three strategic priorities and nine goals, seen in the visual below (Figure 12) and listed below (NUV, 2021, p.6):

“Strategic Priority (SP) 1: Provide equitable access to quality higher education and training

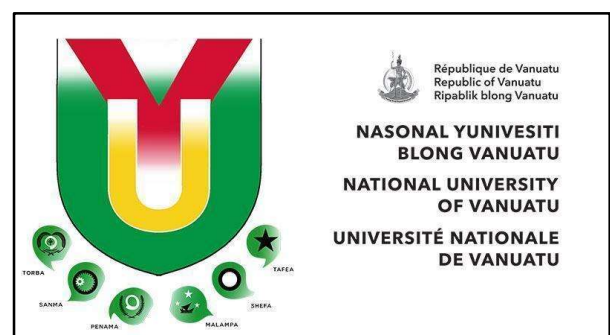
- *GOAL 1: Build a dual-sector, tertiary education structure*
- *GOAL 2: Develop academic and professional excellence*
- *GOAL 3: Provide effective student support*

SP2: Strengthen the capacity of the NUV as an effective, and sustainable educational institution

- *GOAL 4: Build the NUV structure and capacity*
- *GOAL 5: Develop NUV infrastructure and technology*
- *GOAL 6: Ensure financial viability and sustainability*

SP3: Nurture our uniqueness

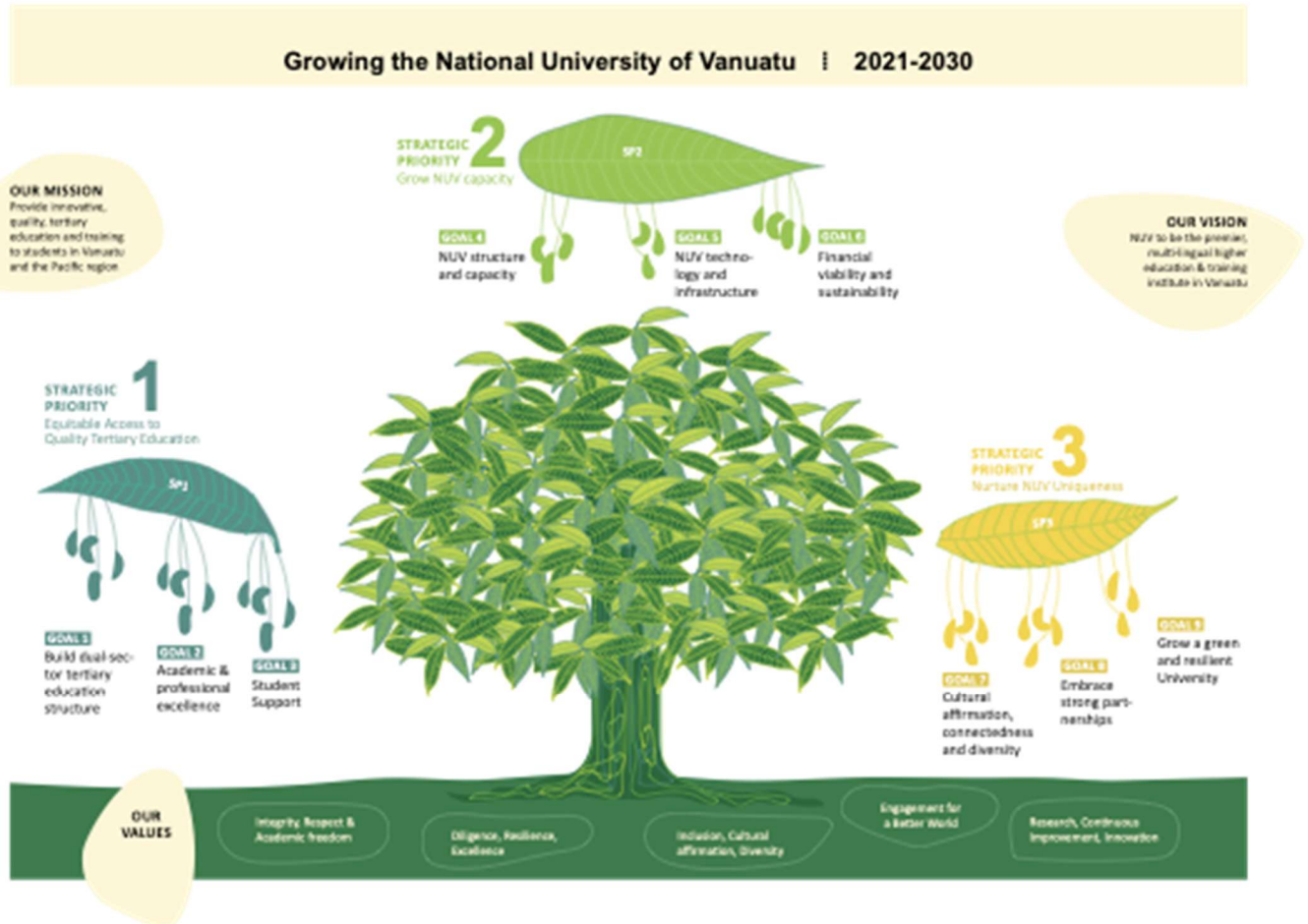
- *GOAL 7: Cultural affirmation, connectedness and diversity*
- *GOAL 8: Embrace strong partnerships*



• GOAL 9: Grow a resilient, green and blue university”

Figure 12.

Visualisation of the 2021-2030 NUV Strategic Plan.



Source: NUV, 2021, p.7

National Priorities

In line with the critical policy analysis (CPA) framework outlined in Chapter 3, this section examines how national development plans, education sector strategies and PSET policies position the National University of Vanuatu within Vanuatu’s broader development agenda. The strategic frameworks of Vanuatu 2030: The People’s Plan, VETSS 2020-2030 and the National Human Resource Development Plan (NHRDP) have identified quality education, job creation, sustainable growth, institutional strengthening, and inclusivity as guiding national objectives (MoET, 2019; RoV, 2016, 2019). NUV has closely aligned their 2021-2030 Strategic Plan with these frameworks to “...offer effective, high quality, dual-sector tertiary education for

students in Vanuatu and the region, designed to meet national development objectives and skill demands in both the private and public sectors” (NUV, 2021, p.11), and are expected to produce an increasing number of graduates in teaching, health, tourism, and technology, directly addressing national workforce and societal needs. Further to this, NUV’s strategic plan articulates its purpose to deliver “higher education advancement and lifelong learning through academic and professional excellence by way of training, teaching and learning in both English and French official languages, research and international cooperation” (NUV, 2021, p. 5). To display this alignment more clearly, I have developed the following mapping tables (Tables 12, 13, and 14) that map the various national policies, strategies, and plans to NUV's efforts to achieve these national priorities.

Table 12:

Mapping National Human Resources Development Programme 2020-2030 and the National University of Vanuatu Strategic Plan

NHRDP 2020-2030	NUV
SF1: <i>PSET System contributes to the Vanuatu 2030 Objectives</i>	SP3: <i>Nurturing our Uniqueness / Goal 9: Grow a Green and Resilient University</i> SP3: <i>Nurturing our Uniqueness / Goal 7: Foster Cultural Affirmation, Connectedness and Diversity</i>
SF2: <i>Evidence-based decisions</i>	Core Value: <i>“Commit to evidence-based, continuous improvement in all our work”</i> (NUV, 2021, p.16)
SO3: <i>VQA-approved qualifications, nationally recognised and regionally equivalent</i>	SP1: <i>Equitable Access to Quality PSET / Goal 2: Academic and Professional Excellence</i> SP3: <i>Nurturing our Uniqueness / Objective 7.3: Diversity & Inclusion</i>
SO4: <i>Equitable access to PSET opportunities</i>	SP1: <i>Equitable Access to Quality PSET / Goal 3: Effective & Inclusive Student Support</i>
SD2: <i>Merger of all public PSET institutions into one administration</i>	SP1: <i>Equitable Access to Quality PSET / Goal 1: Build an integrated dual-sector PSET for Vanuatu</i>
SD3: <i>Flexible</i>	SP2: <i>Strengthen NUV Capacity / Objective 5.2: Develop Technology</i>

<i>qualification delivery modes</i>	
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Source: NUV, 2021; RoV, 2019.

Table 13 below aligns national education and training priorities with NUV's strategic direction, clarifying the university's role in advancing Vanuatu's broader education objectives.

Table 13.

Mapping Vanuatu Education and Training Sector Strategy (VETSS) 2020-2030 and the National University of Vanuatu Strategic Plan

VETSS 2020-2030	NUV
S15: <i>Improve enrolment and quality of PSET by developing and implementing the Vanuatu National University Act</i>	<p>Objective 1.2: <i>Strengthen existing academic programs and expand offerings</i></p> <p>Objective 1.1, KPI 10: <i>Student enrolment, retention & graduate rates</i></p> <p>Objective 1.2, KPI 11: <i>Growth in student enrolment, retention and graduation</i></p> <p>Objective 7.3, Action Step 2: <i>Track enrolment, retention, graduation and satisfaction rates, disaggregated by gender and disability</i></p>
S16: <i>Strengthen enrolment and quality of PSET by reviewing and implementing the PSET policy</i>	<p><i>“The long-term goal for the NUV is to integrate the PSET sector in Vanuatu, effectively combining all PSET into one comprehensive educational institution, using a dual-sector approach to higher education, and providing clear and connected educational and professional paths for students” (NUV, 2021, p.11)</i></p> <p>SP1, G1, Objective 1.1, Action Step 3: <i>Research educational best practices for dual-sector universities, in the Pacific and beyond.</i></p>
S19: <i>Research</i>	<p>Core Value #5: <i>“...encourages and values interdisciplinary and collaborative endeavors that facilitate discovery. Through integrating research and technology at all levels, we promote innovation in teaching, learning, and research, and commit to evidence-based, continuous improvement in all our work” (NUV, 2021, p.16)</i></p> <p>Objective 2.3: <i>Promote research and critical thinking skills</i></p>

Source: MoET, 2019; NUV, 2021.

The Vanuatu People's Plan 2016-2030 comprises three pillars: societal, environmental, and economic. Most education-oriented development priorities are found under the Society pillar, articulated as: “The society pillar seeks to ensure we maintain a vibrant cultural identity underpinning a peaceful, just and inclusive society that is supported by responsive and capable institutions, delivering quality services to all citizens.” (RoV, 2016, p.10). Additionally, NUV's

strategy extends beyond the delivery of education to include initiatives that support the Environmental and Economic pillars as well (NUV, 2021; RoV, 2016). Table 14 below maps the NUV Strategic Plan with the Vanuatu 2030: The People’s Plan.

Table 14.

Mapping Vanuatu People’s Plan 2016-2030 and the National University of Vanuatu Strategic Plan

Vanuatu 2030: The People’s Plan	NUV
SOC.1.2.: <i>Preserve and enhance cultural and traditional knowledges</i>	<p>Goal 7, Objective 7.1: <i>Foster cultural affirmation</i></p> <p>Goal 7, Objective 7.2: <i>Encourage cultural connectedness</i></p> <p>SP3, Goal 7, Objective 7.1, Action step 2: <i>“Incorporate cultural traditional knowledge into program content for new and existing programs”</i> (NUV, 2021, p.50)</p>
SOC.1.6: <i>Integrate culture and heritage into education</i>	<p>Goal 7, Objective 7.1: <i>Foster cultural affirmation</i></p> <p>Goal 7, Objective 7.2: <i>Encourage cultural connectedness</i></p>
SOC.2.1.: <i>Access & Equity to Education</i>	<p>“NUV aims to become a model for inclusive tertiary education” (NUV, 2021, p.13)</p> <p>Objective 3.3, KPI 5: <i>% of student enrolment, retention and graduation by gender and disability</i></p> <p>Objective 3.3, KPI 11: <i>Student enrolment by island of origin/residence</i></p> <p>Objective 7.3, Action Step 2: <i>Track enrolment, retention, graduation and satisfaction rates, disaggregated by gender and disability</i></p>
SOC.2.2.: <i>Improved performance management systems, teacher training and quality delivery of education</i>	<p>Goal 2, Objective 2.2, Action Step 3: <i>“Develop and enforce clear excellence criteria for teaching, research, and administration, to be used in the recruitment and systematic performance evaluation of faculty and staff”</i> (NUV, 2021, p. 40)</p>
SOC.2.3.: <i>Formalize lifelong learning within the education system</i>	<p>The NUV will play a key role in accomplishing this through “providing higher education advancement and lifelong learning through academic and professional excellence by way of training, teaching and learning in both the English and French official languages, research and international cooperation.” (p.5)</p> <p>Mission: <i>Our mission is to provide quality, dual-sector higher education</i></p>

	<p><i>advancement and lifelong learning, in both French and English languages. (p.6)</i></p> <p><i>The NUV was created for the explicit purpose of providing “higher education advancement and lifelong learning through academic and professional excellence by way of training, teaching and learning, in both the English and French official languages, research and international partnerships.”</i></p> <p><i>The NUV aims to produce graduates who can perform effectively in both English and French, as well as Bislama. (pp.10-11)</i></p>
<p>SOC.2.4.: <i>Increase higher education opportunities, including technical and vocational training and skills</i></p>	<p>Objective 1.2: <i>Strengthen existing academic programs and expand offerings</i></p>
<p>SOC.6.9.: <i>Research & data-informed decision making</i></p>	<p>Core Value: <i>“Commit to evidence-based, continuous improvement in all our work”</i> (NUV, 2021, p.16)</p> <p>SP1, G1, Objective 1.1, Action Step 3: <i>Research educational best practices for dual-sector universities, in the Pacific and beyond.</i></p> <p>Core Value #5: <i>“...encourages and values interdisciplinary and collaborative endeavors that facilitate discovery. Through integrating research and technology at all levels, we promote innovation in teaching, learning, and research, and commit to evidence-based, continuous improvement in all our work”</i> (NUV, 2021, p.16)</p> <p>Objective 2.3: <i>Promote research and critical thinking skills</i></p>

Source: NUV, 2021; RoV, 2016.

Regionalism

Vanuatu has engaged regionally through partnerships such as APTC and as a member country and campus host nation with USP, among others. These collaborations supported capacity-building and technical skills development as the national PSET system was being constructed. In mid-2024, the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) coordinated the inaugural meeting of the four national universities of the sub-region, held in Port Vila, Vanuatu. In attendance were four Vice Chancellors and senior leaders from the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), the Pacific Community (SPC), and the MSG (see Image 1 below), under the inaugural meeting’s theme of “Uniting for Progress: Collaborative Pathways in Melanesian Higher Education”

(MSG, 2024a, 2024b). Several relevant challenges and opportunities were identified that relate specifically to this research project:

Challenges

- “Maintaining quality control and quality assurance to ensure credibility and international recognition;
- ensuring accessibility of higher education to a broader community, but at the same time ensuring quality output where products of Universities are employable regionally and internationally;
- contextualising curriculum and research so they are fit for purpose, and reflect the needs and interests of the relevant countries;
- managing geo-political posturing in ways that Universities choice of curricula does not get impacted adversely;
- navigating between the dictates of “Nationalism” and the necessity for cross fertilisation of ideas arising from the nature of cooperation and greater integration efforts; and,
- acknowledged that gaps between regional and national institutions, including academia, that provide services to the Pacific People need to be identified and holistically addressed.

Opportunities

- Encourage conversations specifically in relation to partnership arrangements in teaching resources, curriculum material and resource mobilisation not only between MSG National Universities but amongst National Universities and academic institutions within the region and outside the Pacific region;
- collaborate with each other for quality control and quality assurance by sharing best practices in such areas as “adjunct” arrangements, greater use of TVET, apprenticeship schemes accreditation through micro-qualifications, use of IT advances for hybrid teaching and learning, such as [UPNG’s] in Open University Centre modules;
- iterated that the MSG utilize its network of development partners to raise requisite resources for programmes and research projects at the MSG National Universities;
- encouraged MSG to find adequate funding to place more students at MSG National Universities for studies, such as the Fr Walter Lini Scholarship;

- proposed for consideration the extension of the Fr Walter Lini scholarship to other MSG Countries; and to be named after the respective founding fathers - Sir Ratu Kamisese Mara (Fiji), Sir Michael Somare (PNG) and Sir Peter Kenilorea (Solomon Islands);
- Encourage collaboration between MSG, PIFS, and SPC to mobilise resources for education programs. This can benefit this space in relation to accessing climate finance.
- All MSG national universities are in a transformation phase, which is timely to accommodate initiatives for collaboration and innovation through such programs as the “living lab concept” and the “the Centre for Islands Futures”;
- collaboration amongst the universities to develop an ecosystem of cooperation, innovation and academic excellence where everything is interlinked and reliant on each other and further emphasised the value of thinking in terms of a higher education ecosystem of not only excellence and innovation, but culturally sensitive, developmentally targeted and appropriate;
- strengthening the role of universities in human resources development to bridge skills gaps in the MSG region;
- reiterated the need to collaborate in addressing the negative impacts of labour mobility on economic development and national economies where often the real impacts felt at the community level are not necessarily helpful;
- recognised that conversations and actions on peace and security be considered in tandem going forward;
- recognised the important role that the MSG plays in collaboration and cooperation in the sub-regional and regional space;
- the convening of the inaugural VCs meeting is a catalyst for change in the Melanesian Sub-Region and the Pacific;
- National Universities are important avenues for shaping and moulding leaders for tomorrow;
- recognised the need for partnerships in the health, peace, and security sector; and,
- support the development of nationally accredited micro-qualifications (apprenticeship accreditations) and micro communications for learning that can be accessed in the country. Micro-communications in-country will ensure improved accessibility of quality education to students regardless of their location” (MSG, 2024a, pp.3-5).

Image 01.

MSG Secretariat (middle) and the Vice Chancellors of SINU, FNU, UPNG & NUV (L-R).



Source: MSG, 2024b, p.9.

At this monumental meeting, the Melanesian national universities highlighted the importance of national languages and cultures, and the role these universities will play. This included the establishment of language and culture centres at these national universities to strengthen and support cultural resilience and resurgence (MSG, 2024a, pp. 6-7). The critical position of these national universities to serve their societies and peoples was further aligned to the facilitation and coordination of research, particularly in the areas of Peace and Security and Climate Adaptation, and where appropriate, “the use of existing and traditional and cultural mechanisms to address and respond to...challenges in the region” (MSG, 2024a, p.8).

Furthermore, NUV participates in regional frameworks such as PacREF, PQF, and EQAP by designing and positioning its academic programmes for national relevance, as well as for increased mobility and recognition across Moana Oceania (SPC, 2025a). There remain tensions, however, between regional standardisation and national specificity, particularly in embedding kastom and vernacular knowledge within curricula.

Internationalisation

Vanuatu’s PSET is increasingly internationalised via engagement with regional and international institutions, organisations and governments. These links enhance standards, mobility, and international access to qualifications. Internationalisation for NUV is primarily donor-driven, with substantial support from Australia, France, New Zealand, and international agencies. While partnerships bring resources, they also risk dependency. A key challenge is ensuring that internationalisation strengthens Indigenous epistemologies and national priorities

rather than replicating Euro-Western models. Strategic opportunities lie in positioning NUV as a hub for Indigenous knowledge, Pacific resilience, and cultural sustainability. At the writing of this study, NUV has partnerships with or is in the process of developing partnerships with the following international universities and networks, regional universities and networks, and national organisations (NUV, 2021; NUV, 2025):

- University of New Caledonia (New Caledonia)
- University of Toulouse 1 Capitole (France)
- University of Toulouse 2 Jean-Jaurès (France)
- Taylor’s University (Malaysia)
- Victoria University of Wellington (Aotearoa New Zealand)
- Moncton University (Canada)
- James Cook University (Australia)
- Agence Française de Développement (AFD)
- Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) - Vanuatu Antenna
- Pacific Islands University Research Network (PIURN)
- Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU)
- Vanuatu Public Service Commission
- Vanuatu Department of Tourism
- Vanuatu Tourism Organisation
- V-Lab (*business, idea and organisation incubator, and co-working space*)
- Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- Vanuatu Fisheries Department
- Vanuatu Intellectual Property Office
- Vanuatu Ministry of Climate Change Adaptation, Meteorology, Geo-Hazards, Environment, Energy and Disaster Management (MoCC)
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

These partnerships have been developed to support dual degree academic qualifications, joint curriculum delivery, research collaborations, technological and infrastructure support, apprenticeships, and other innovative activities (NUV, 2021, 2025).

Collaborative Sensemaking: the Vanuatu Case Study

Consistent with the methodological commitments of *storian* outlined in Chapter 3, the collaborative sensemaking process in Vanuatu remained attentive to relational contexts, participants' shared knowledge, and the co-constructed interpretation (collaborative sensemaking). In this section, the Vanuatu case study is further explored and unpacked through collaborative sensemaking with participants, centring on how national, regional and international priorities are navigated within NUV, and the wider PSET sub-sector. The participants articulated, negotiated, and reflected on the tensions between externally imposed agendas and Vanuatu's national development and cultural priorities. In the Vanuatu case, the collaborative sensemaking process remained guided by the relational commitments underpinning *storian* and the wider methodological framing of the thesis. Analysis sought to honour participants' narratives, as well as the relationships, contexts, and values within which those accounts were gifted, expressed and understood. The themes presented in the case study are grounded in lived experiences, cultural frameworks, and reflective narratives, revealing opportunities and challenges.

The Voices / Narratives (Participants and Process)

Research ethics in Vanuatu are shaped by *kastom*, relationality, reciprocity, and respect. Research must recognise that knowledge is collectively held and safeguarded, rather than individually owned. Consent is not solely a procedural formality, but a continuing process of accountability to people, communities, and relationships. Research engagement is expected to strengthen social cohesion and affirm cultural dignity, aligning with Vanuatu's broader visions and consistent with national research guidance (MoET, 2021b; VKS, 2025). For this study, participants were drawn from NUV, relevant government offices, and educational leaders in Vanuatu.

The Vanuatu case study involved seven participants, who contributed through seven face-to-face *storian* sessions, resulting in approximately 459 minutes of recorded dialogue. These individuals held diverse roles at the National University of Vanuatu, in various government offices, and across the wider education sector. Critically, their engagement, clearly articulated during the sessions, is fundamentally grounded in strengthening the country and its peoples. This collective commitment was evident in comments such as one government employee's description of their work, not in individual terms but as a shared obligation: "*meet the national demand...to make it work, that's my vision*" (P26). Overall, the *storian* sessions effectively

revealed the participants' profound dedication to building and strengthening education in Vanuatu.

Participants expected research relationships to be continuous and mutually beneficial, not isolated interactions. For instance, a university employee underscored the expectation of continued engagement, stating that the conversation was not over after the initial recording and expressing a desire to return to and enrich the narratives over time: "*I will always be happy to answer your questions...when you give me [the] transcript, [I can] add some comments*" (P23, University Employee). This willingness to continue participating in the research aligns with *ni-Vanuatu* concepts, where knowledge is viewed as communally owned and adaptable rather than a fixed artifact extracted by an outside researcher. It thus frames collaborative understanding as an ongoing relational endeavour, in which participants are expected to actively re-engage with the analysis rather than merely receive it passively.

Storian was the chosen research methodology, aligning with Indigenous epistemologies that privilege dialogic storytelling, relationality, and co-constructed meaning-making rather than extractive inquiry. In Vanuatu scholarship, *storian* has been documented as a culturally appropriate research approach and is commonly operationalised as open-ended, semi-structured, and opportunistic conversations embedded in the context (Warrick, 2009). *Storian* sessions took place in a variety of spaces, responding to participants' preferences. Conversations were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed, and returned for participant validation and clarification to foster accuracy and ownership of meaning. This practice reflects established uses of *storian* across Vanuatu research, where validation and collaborative sensemaking are recognised strategies to safeguard narrative integrity and (re)presentation of findings (Bird, 2017; Eldads Vira et al., 2025; Shipman, 2008; Willans, 2013a).

Initial thematic analyses were conducted, and emergent themes were shared with participants. Anonymised narrative selections were presented alongside reflective prompts to facilitate further collaborative sensemaking, enabling participants to affirm, refine, challenge or expand interpretations and presentations. Through this iterative process, analyses were co-constructed and grounded in *ni-Vanuatu* epistemologies, resisting externally imposed interpretations. The approach mirrors documented Vanuatu research practice in which *storian* structures facilitate relational interpretations (Warrick, 2011).

Emergent Themes

The emergence of NUV has created both excitement about the future of Vanuatu's higher education and hesitations as they navigate significant reforms in the education sector, policy development, and the consolidation of PSET institutions. Participants described NUV as a bold

assertion of sovereignty and a fragile entity still in its infancy. As in other contexts across Moana Oceania, how to centre national priorities while negotiating the pressures of regional frameworks and international expectations was a central inquiry explored with participants during and beyond the *storian* sessions. The following themes emerged with the research participants from Vanuatu and illustrate how the aspirations, tensions and dynamics are lived, interpreted, and contested:

Centring National Priorities:

- Building a National University from Limited Foundations
- Embedding Culture, Language and Indigenous Knowledge
- Universities as Service and National Leadership

Impact of Regionalism:

- Navigating Between NUV and Regional Institutions
- Regionally Shared Cultural Frameworks and Solidarity

Impact of Internationalisation:

- External Standards and Pressures
- Donor Dependence and Opportunities
- Strategic Internationalisation

National Priorities, *Theme #1: Building a National University from Limited Foundations*

The most consistent theme across the narratives was the recognition that NUV remains in a formative stage. Participants spoke candidly about the complexities of building an institution with minimal resourcing:

“We had to start from scratch...recruiting a small team, writing policies, manuals, regulations. It was good that Parliament passed the Bill unanimously, but political statements were not necessarily followed by resources to enable us to do things” (P24, University Employee).

This narrative reflects both determination and frustration. While there is political momentum for the national university, participants highlighted the gap between legislation, and the material support it requires. The experience of beginning with “a very, very minimal team” (P23, University Employee) underscores the precarious reality of institution-building in a resource-limited island nation. Despite these constraints, participants framed the establishment of NUV as a historical step in asserting national autonomy in education.

The structural limitations and minimal resourcing discussed by participants extended beyond financial and human capital, encompassing the institution's very structure. A University

Employee (P25) highlighted a significant cost driver. Vanuatu's distinct dual Francophone and Anglophone education system. This necessitates "*two different cohorts doing the same course...one lecturer in French and one in English,*" a situation they noted as uniquely expensive.

Consequently, establishing the National University of Vanuatu (NUV) is complicated because the obligation to provide bilingual services effectively doubles the operational costs. The process of institution-building is thus inextricably linked to the lasting impact of colonial language policies, requiring the new national university to be designed from its outset to operate successfully across both linguistic divides.

National Priorities, Theme #2: Embedding Culture, Language and Indigenous Knowledge

Another strong theme that emerged was the imperative to embed Vanuatu's cultural and linguistic diversity at the centre of the university. Participants were conscious of the risks of reproducing external templates that marginalise local epistemologies and multilingualism. As one participant remarked:

"We have that diversity in languages, and we cannot just have one national [language]. We cannot discriminate [against] other islands or villages" (P27, University Employee).

Others reflected on the separation of so-called formal and informal spaces of knowledge within academia:

"Students are happy to talk about kastom knowledge outside the classroom, but inside, in this formal structure, that's not the place for it. Universities can play a role in breaking that divide" (P28, University Employee).

These accounts highlight the epistemic challenge NUV faces: designing curricula that affirm kastom knowledge and multilingualism while confronting regional and international expectations for academic formality. Participants saw this as a moral and cultural responsibility as much as an educational one.

The work of integrating local language and *kastom* holds profound emotional significance for some participants. One University Employee (P25) reflected on the distressing realisation that *Bislama* was supplanting the vernacular upon returning to their village, stating, "*...we have so much here and we didn't know...I told my family about it...I said, you have to speak the language. It's your identity.*" This expression of loss, combined with a sense of duty, highlights how arguments over the language of instruction are fundamentally debates about the preservation of cultural memory, narratives, and ecological wisdom.

National Priorities, Theme #3: Universities as Service and National Leadership

For several participants, the national university's purpose is best understood through an ethic of service to the nation and its peoples. As one participant explained during the establishment of NUV:

"We need to develop a mission for the country in higher education...we're not talking about setting up a huge university like USP. But if we don't start now, when will we start" (P24, University Employee).

Under this theme, NUV is framed less as a site of prestige or global competition and more as a vehicle for collective, national advancement and cultural resilience. The ethics of leadership and responsibility resonated strongly, echoing shared Melanesian relational values. Participants' narratives suggest the university not as an end in itself, but as a means of uplifting Vanuatu's communities, peoples, and nation-building.

This commitment to service was made tangible through specific reforms targeting those most disadvantaged by the education system. For instance, a new pathway was established to bring school dropouts into the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT). A participant explained this initiative: *"From 2022, we take [the Year 10, 12 & 13 dropouts] to VIT, and we transform them. Now we don't drop anyone...we give them a bridging programme...we're creating the market for VIT"* (P26, Government Employee). This approach shows that national leadership is defined less by fostering academic competition and more by designing inclusive systems that support young people who might otherwise be lost to unemployment or seasonal labour migration. The NUV and its associated national PSET institutions are thus reframed as vital infrastructures for social protection and opportunity, emphasising a collectivist principle of 'no one left behind' over a strict, narrow meritocratic selection process.

Regionalism, Theme #1: Navigating Between NUV and Regional Institutions

Participants were clear that the creation of NUV cannot be understood or decontextualised separately from the historical dominance of USP. Many noted that the transition to a national university has been complex. One described the practical challenges:

"We were part of USP, but with NUV, we had to transition....resources did not follow that integration path. The Ministry was still paying the staff. So, it's been a process" (P25, University Employee).

Another reflected on the broader pattern of institutional development across Moana Oceania:

“Other Pacific universities became universities after being higher [education] institutes. Unlike here, we didn’t have that. So, the transition is not complete” (P25, University employee).

These reflections suggest that while the establishment of NUV signals national confidence and maturity, the absence of a clear plan for institutional consolidation has made NUV’s early years particularly difficult.

The consolidation of institutions and their associated accreditation processes had concrete, not abstract, consequences. As one university employee (P25) recounted, the upheaval forced them to inform students, *“...we couldn’t give them a certificate at graduation...it’s tough! It’s on us, not the students.”* This illustrates that restructuring creates uncertainty for learners, who must rely on shifting institutional structures to ensure their dedication does not go to waste. Such experiences underscore the significant ethical considerations inherent in establishing national university systems.

Regionalism, Theme #2: Regionally Shared Cultural Frameworks and Solidarity

Despite these tensions, participants also expressed a strong sense of solidarity with other nations of Moana Oceania. The language of *wansolwara* was invoked to affirm cultural unity across the region:

“All the Pacific Islands are the same...we say wansolwara, all from the sea. It’s not small islands; it’s a big ocean. That’s the perspective” (P26, Government Employee).

This framing positions regionalism not solely as a matter of cooperation and collaboration, but as a more profound cultural kinship. Such expressions of solidarity suggest that regionalism retains moral and cultural significance, even as national universities seek to assert greater positionality, relevance and sovereignty.

Participants frequently identified burgeoning Melanesian forums as manifestations of this unity. For instance, a university employee (P28) noted, *“MSG brought all the national universities together recently. That could be quite interesting to see what collaborations could happen across”* (P26). The inaugural gathering of MSG Vice-Chancellors was interpreted not just as a technical meeting, but as a genuine expression of Melanesian regionalism rooted in shared languages, *kastom*, and historical struggles. This shift repositions regional cooperation away from a single dominant centre towards a sub-regional, pluri-centric structure, allowing NUV to participate as an equal partner rather than a subordinate entity.

Internationalisation, Theme #1: External Standards and Pressures

Participants noted the pressure from external benchmarks and the risk of misalignment with national priorities. One participant captured this ethical dilemma:

“In some ways, you’re told that you can’t create a university the way you want. External forces tell you there are certain benchmarks. Ethically, I have an issue with that” (P29, University Employee).

This sense of imposed standards reflects broader concerns across the region where the global academic system privileges Western models of excellence at the expense of Indigenous priorities, approaches and epistemologies.

External quality assurance standards, such as those imposed by VQA on NUV, highlight the double-edged nature of international and regional benchmarks. As one government employee (P26) critiqued, *“VQA was putting a one-size-fits-all, and it didn’t work.”* This rigidity can impede smaller institutions, even while the standards aim to raise quality and establish clear progression pathways. The response from national stakeholders is often to redesign the regulatory architecture, creating more graduated, context-sensitive frameworks that better translate external notions of 'quality.' This allows training providers to *“move up”* and meet progressively higher standards (P26).

Internationalisation, Theme #2: Donor Dependence and Opportunities

Donors were recognised as both enablers and constraints. As one participant explained:

“The Australian government is involved, but through a skills partnership...ADB has been to us every June. They’re trying to address national priorities” (P26, Government Employee).

Donors are acknowledged for their contributions, but there is also an implicit recognition that reliance on external financing can distort institutional priorities. The narratives suggest ambivalence, gratitude for support, but caution about dependency.

Participants recounted instances where they strategically directed external funding to align with their national priorities. For example, P26, a government employee, described an ADB investment that was *“pumping a lot of money,”* but emphasised a focused approach: *“we’re fixing VIT first, next to the National University, so people believe in us. Then we move to maritime, to nursing...let’s fix one first.”* This illustrates a desire to leverage international aid to strengthen a single national institution as a proof of concept, rather than fragmenting funds across various sites purely for donor recognition. This approach signifies a subtle yet

meaningful transition from donor-driven project logic to a Vanuatu-designed system logic, even as the fundamental dependence on external capital persists.

Internationalisation, Theme #3: Strategic Internationalisation

Some participants framed internationalisation as productive when strategically aligned with national and regional priorities. One participant described a forward-looking vision:

“Some of the courses we develop here...focus on national priorities aligned with regional environmental issues. While I’m developing a course, I’m also thinking about the broader Pacific region” (P29, University Employee).

This reflects a strategy of selective partnerships and academic programme development. Participating in global academic networks is not for the prestige, but to strengthen local and regional relevance, particularly as NUV continues its development. In this sense, internationalisation is not rejected, but repurposed to serve national needs first, while also recognising regional needs.

Strategic internationalisation, as articulated by P28 (University Employee), is a deliberate choice to *“play the system”* to ensure knowledge flows into, not out of, Vanuatu. P28 emphasised the potential: *“a lot can be offered here, so more research and more appreciation of what these and other countries hold...everything you can learn from the Pacific can be taught here in this [university].”* This perspective re-envisioned sending students abroad; instead, Vanuatu serves as a national and regional educational centre where students can engage with Pacific knowledges *in situ*. Consequently, internationalisation becomes a tool for achieving epistemic sovereignty and place-based knowledge diplomacy, rather than a mechanism for exporting national talent.

Research Significance and Implications

The participants’ narratives and document reviews reflect a national PSET system in its infancy, navigating layered complexities of aspiration and constraint. On the one hand, NUV is envisioned as an instrument of national service and leadership, embedding culture, language, and kastom knowledge at the heart of higher education. On the other hand, it must negotiate the consolidation of existing and quite distinct national PSET institutions, regional initiatives, and international expectations. Participants revealed resilience, innovation, and a clear recognition of the obstacles on this path. They also reflect a determination that Vanuatu must chart its own path, even if progress is uneven. The challenge for NUV will be to sustain its spirit of service

and self-determination while navigating the entanglements of regionalism and internationalisation.

Reflections on Research in Vanuatu

Conducting research in Vanuatu required careful attention to relational ethics, political complexities and institutional sensitivities (Eldads Vira et al., 2025). Most participants were engaged through their professional roles within government offices or NUV. *Storian* often reflected both their personal commitments and their organisation's objectives. While this facilitated access to policy and institutional perspectives, it also required careful navigation of confidentiality, political sensitivities, and the risk of over-representing official narratives at the expense of broader voices.

As previously discussed, the research process was guided by *storian*. This dialogic and relational method emphasises trust, reciprocity, and shared reflection (Warrick, 2009). Even within formal settings such as government offices or university meeting rooms, *storian* created opportunities for participants to situate their perspectives within lived experience and cultural frameworks. As in other Moana Oceania contexts, legitimacy in Vanuatu was measured less by methodological rigour alone, and more by whether the research process honoured values of humility, respect and mutual accountability (Eldads Vira et al., 2025). Because NUV is a relatively young institution, discussions about its role and direction were often forward-looking and aspirational. Participants reflected on the tensions between national ownership and donor dependency, and on the need to position the university within Vanuatu's cultural, social, and development priorities. Engaging with these narratives demanded sensitivity to power dynamics between government and community expectations, between national priorities and regional frameworks, and between local agency and external influence.

Ultimately, research in Vanuatu reinforced the understanding that knowledge generation is both relational and political. By approaching participants as collaborators rather than subjects, and by situating research within the values of reciprocity and service, the study sought to contribute not only to academic scholarship but to strengthening and elevating dialogue on the future of PSET education in Vanuatu. The themes identified in the Vanuatu case study are relationally interpreted collaborative understandings shaped through dialogues, accountability, and contexts.

Emerging and Continuing Priorities

The establishment of NUV is itself an emerging priority, representing the country's aspiration for educational sovereignty and sustainable development. Participants highlighted the need to strengthen support and resourcing through increased staffing, the implementation of policy frameworks, and the development of PSET research and data systems, among other measures. Beyond these structural areas, there was a strong call to embed Vanuatu's cultural and linguistic diversity across the national curriculum and to have the university act as a custodian of *kastom* knowledge. Continuing priorities for NUV included aligning academic programmes with national development priorities, such as climate resilience, youth employment, and linguistic inclusivity, ensuring that PSET in Vanuatu contributes directly to the nation's cultural, social, and economic well-being.

Challenges

Participants revealed several persistent challenges. There is a significant resourcing gap with political commitments to NUV not always matched by adequate funding or staffing. The pressure of international benchmarks, such as publications, rankings, and English-language dominance, threatens to marginalise and exclude Vanuatu's Indigenous epistemologies and linguistic diversity. Finally, systemic inequities, such as rural-urban divides in access and capacity, risk undermining the NUV's mandate to serve the whole nation. These challenges reflect the complexity of establishing a national university while negotiating regional and global expectations.

Opportunities

Despite these constraints, participants identified significant opportunities. Vanuatu's rising population presents both a challenge and a demographic opportunity for NUV to provide training and leadership pathways. Regional solidarity, articulated through *wansolwara*, offers opportunities for collaboration with neighbouring national universities on curriculum design, research, and cultural revitalisation, as seen in the 2024 inaugural meeting of the Vice Chancellors of the Melanesian national universities (MSG, 2024a). Donor partnerships, while requiring careful negotiation, provide critical resources for programmes in areas such as climate resilience, teacher education, tourism, and technical skills. The deliberate embedding of *kastom* knowledge and multilingualism at NUV, through the establishment of a Centre for Languages

and Culture, is a unique opportunity for Vanuatu to further shape a university that is distinctly national yet regionally and globally relevant.

Research Futures

The Vanuatu case study highlights fertile ground for further inquiry into how national universities navigate sovereignty and dependency. As data are collected more systematically and made readily available, longitudinal research will be beneficial for tracking NUV's institutional growth and efficiency, its staffing, governance, programmes, and accreditation, and for assessing whether national priorities remain central as external pressures intensify. A tracer study of NUV graduates will also provide further evidence of the impacts of the NUV study on Vanuatu's cultural, economic, and social well-being. Comparative research across Moana Oceania could illuminate how shared values, such as relationality and *wansolwara*, shape national universities differently in distinct contexts. There is also scope for a deeper exploration of the role of *kastom* knowledge in NUV's academic programmes.

Chapter 8. Case Study: Fiji

The Contexts

Fiji is an archipelagic nation in Moana Oceania, comprising more than 300 islands scattered across a vast ocean area, with the two largest, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, forming the political and economic centre of the country (See Figure 13 below). Fiji sits roughly between Vanuatu and Tonga, positioning Fiji as a regional hub that links Melanesian and Polynesian contexts.

Fiji is classified as an upper-middle-income country (UMIC) (Metreau et al., 2024; WB, 2025h), whose demographic, socio-economic, environmental, political-institutional, and educational contexts shape the challenges and opportunities for relevant, equitable, and sustainable post-school education & training (PSET). The country is characterised by a youthful population, increasing urbanisation, climate vulnerabilities, geographic dispersion, a mixed economy with subsistence, tourism, agricultural, and service sectors, and a history of political instability coupled with an evolving institutional framework. Constitutional reforms have marked this evolution, as have Indigenous (*iTaukei*) rights and commitments to greater equity and inclusion, particularly in education. Understanding these contexts is essential for assessing how Fiji’s PSET systems can better respond to national development, equity, and sustainability imperatives.

Figure 13.

Map of the Islands of Fiji



Source: DiscoverFiji.com

Demographic Contexts

The total population for 2024 was 928,784, with a moderate 5% growth projected for the coming years (WB, 2025i). With 27% of the population aged 0-14, above the global average, this youthful population is placing increasing demand on Fiji's public services, including education. Urbanisation is substantial, with a large percentage of the population residing in urban or semi-urban areas (~60%), particularly Lautoka, Nadi and the capital city of Suva (WB, 2025i). Ethnic diversity is a key characteristic of the country. Indigenous Fijians (*iTaukei*) make up approximately 62.8% (increased from the 2007 census), and Indo-Fijians 32.7% (decreased from the 2007 census) are the two largest groups, with smaller communities of other Pacific Islanders, Europeans, Asians, and others (FBS, 2017). These ethnic groups intersect with geography, with *iTaukei* communities more prevalent in rural and remote areas, which have implications for education and training.

Socio-Economic Contexts

Fiji's economy is more diversified than those of other Pacific island nations. Key sectors include tourism, agriculture, fisheries, services and remittances. The GDP in 2023 was about US\$5.5 billion, with per capita income reflecting Fiji's upper-middle income status. Despite this, socio-economic inequality persists. Poverty, under-employment, and youth unemployment remain significant. According to UNICEF, in 2023, around 15% of youth aged 15-24 were unemployed, with female youth particularly disadvantaged (about 22% of females vs. 12% of males) (UNICEF, 2024a). Access to livelihood opportunities is more constrained in rural, remote, and maritime areas, which also tend to have poorer access to infrastructure, internet connectivity, and educational resources. This uneven regional development reinforces disparities in education and training outcomes.

Environmental Contexts

Fiji is subject to environmental risks and climate change impacts, particularly sea-level rise, coastal erosion, flooding, saltwater intrusion, more intense tropical cyclones, and shifting rainfall patterns, which threaten both livelihood systems and infrastructure. The Government has responded with the National Climate Change Policy (FMoE, 2018) and the Climate Change Act of 2021 (GoF, 2021), which provide legal frameworks for mitigation, adaptation, and integrating climate awareness and capacity into education. The National Climate Change policy

emphasises that Fiji's education system must deliver tools for an intergenerational response to climate change and requires integration of climate change into curricula at all levels. PSET institutions, including FNU, deliver academic programmes in climate change, resilience, mitigation, environment & sustainable development, and conduct research around these themes. However, challenges remain in ensuring that these are well-resourced, contextually relevant, integrate Indigenous knowledge, inclusive, and accessible (Lagi et al., 2022).

Political-Institutional Contexts

The political and institutional environment in Fiji is shaped by history, constitutional design, and ongoing reform. Fiji has struggled with various political instabilities over "...45 years, four constitutions, five coups and a period of eight years without a constitution" (Ghai, 2017, p.200). The 1997 Constitution had earlier enshrined a Social Justice Chapter (Chapter 5) obliging the State to make provisions for "effective equality of access" to education and training, land, housing and other domains for disadvantaged groups. However, implementation has been uneven, especially for rural, remote, maritime and *iTaukei* communities. The 2013 Constitution sought to forge a unified national identity that transcended ethnic divisions. It included provisions for fundamental rights, secularism, and social justice (GoF, 2013). Recently, Fiji established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address past human rights violations from periods of coups and military rule (PoRoF, 2024). Policies in recent years have increasingly emphasised gender equality, Indigenous rights, and inclusion of persons with disabilities. However, resources, capacity, and logistical constraints continue to impede full realisation throughout the country.

Education Sector Contexts

Fiji's education system achieves near-universal enrolment at the primary level, supported by government grants and a free education policy. The system comprises hundreds of early childhood care and education centres, over 700 primary schools and more than 170 secondary schools, the majority of which are managed by faith-based and community organisations, in partnership with the government. This co-management model (State/Community partnership) strengthens civic participation in education governance and delivery (Aporosa, 2014). Although Fiji has high school participation rates, student retention declines progressively through the upper years, particularly in rural and maritime areas, where around 39% of students are estimated to leave school before completing secondary education.

Teacher workforce issues remain a concern. While Fiji continues to expand access to education, disparities in teacher qualifications, uneven distribution between urban and rural schools, and limited opportunities for continuous professional development affect educational quality and learner outcomes. The Government’s National Education Policy Framework 2024-2033 (also known as the Denarau Declaration) outlines strategies to strengthen teacher training, enhance leadership capacity, and ensure consistent standards of pedagogy and assessment across Fiji (MoE, 2024). Equity and inclusion are equally central to this policy agenda. Despite overall progress, rural and remote communities, learners with disabilities, and some *iTaukei* and low-income groups continue to face barriers related to distance, resourcing, and linguistics or cultural mismatches between home and school environments (UNICEF, 2024b).

Ongoing challenges include infrastructure gaps, teacher shortages in remote areas, and the financial sustainability of maintaining high coverage in a geographically dispersed island nation. Climate change poses additional strains, with cyclones and flooding frequently disrupting schooling and damaging educational facilities. To address these constraints, the Fijian Government, with support from international partners, has prioritised climate-resilient school infrastructure, inclusion of climate education in schools, improved resource allocation, and strengthened policy coherence with SDG #4 (GPE, 2023). Collectively, these initiatives reflect Fiji’s commitment to delivering equitable, high-quality education and ensuring that every child, regardless of geography or background, has access to meaningful learning opportunities.

Post-School Education & Training (PSET) in Fiji

Building on the preceding presentation of Fiji’s contexts, this section examines the evolution of PSET as a key site where national development priorities, regional cooperation, internationalisation, and Indigenous knowledge systems interact. It traces how Fiji’s PSET landscape has developed from its colonial and missionary foundations into a diverse, increasingly regulated system that serves both domestic and regional needs, illuminating how education policy, institutional reform, and international engagement have shaped the nation’s post-school learning pathways.

Development of PSET in Fiji

The trajectory of PSET in Fiji reflects both national priorities and broader regional developments. Fiji has historically been the hub of regional education in the Pacific, hosting

the main campus of the University of the South Pacific (USP) since its establishment in 1968. Over time, Fiji's PSET system has expanded to a diversified landscape of universities, TVET providers, and regional training centres. Key phases of development can be traced as follows:

Missionary and Colonial Foundations (1800s - 1960s)

Missionary churches were the earliest providers of post-school education in Fiji, establishing theological colleges and teacher training institutions from the 19th century (Tuwere, 2002; Wood, 1978). During the colonial period, Fiji also hosted training colleges in agriculture, nursing, and teaching, primarily designed to prepare public servants and professionals in the colonial administration (Tavola, 1991). Suva Medical School opened in 1885, and Fiji's School of Nursing has been in place since 1893, making it the first nursing school in the Pacific (Usher et al., 2004).

Opportunities for higher education abroad were limited mainly to New Zealand and Australia, and scholarship funding was available. At the same time, most Fijians had access only to vocational or teacher training in-country (Whitehead, 1981). Responding to shifting labour market needs, specifically in education, health and technical fields, Fiji developed its own PSET institutions, such as the Nasinu Teacher's College and the Fiji College of Advanced Education (established in 1947), Fiji College of Agriculture (established in 1954), and the Fiji Institute of Technology (established in 1963) (FNU, 2020).

Regional Hub and Early National Institutions (1970 - 1986)

By the early 1960s, the need for a regional university became clear, setting the stage for the establishment of USP. The creation of USP in Suva in 1968 marked a watershed moment for Fiji and the region. As a regional university, USP provided access to degree-level higher education not only to Fijians but also to Pacific Island students from 12 other member countries (USP, 2018).

In the aftermath of independence in 1970, education was prioritised as a driver of national development. However, provision remained fragmented, with academic higher education dominated by USP and vocational education and training delivered by multiple specialised colleges (Tavola, 1991). In response to growing national skills needs, the Fiji National Training Act became law in 1973, establishing the Fiji National Training Council, later known as the Training and Productivity Authority of Fiji (TPAF), to coordinate and promote technical and

vocational training across industries. The Lautoka Teachers' College was also established during this period to address acute teacher shortages (Mohan et al., 2017). In 1982, it was relocated and reopened as Nasinu Residential College, reflecting ongoing efforts to expand teacher education and strengthen national institutional capacity.

Expansion and Diversification (1987 - 2009)

The late 1980s through the 2000s witnessed both political disruptions and educational reforms. The 1987 coups created economic and social instability, affecting education financing and institutional development (Ghai, 2017). Nevertheless, Fiji continued to expand PSET, particularly in technical and vocational education. The Fiji Institute of Technology grew into a multi-campus provider offering courses in trades, hospitality, and business. By the early 2000s, growing pressure for coherence across the PSET system prompted policy dialogue on quality assurance and institutional mergers. International partners, notably Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, provided technical assistance and scholarships that reinforced Fiji's role as a regional education hub (ADB, 2008). In 2008, the Fiji Parliament passed the Higher Education Act (GoF, 2008). In 2009, the national government made the bold decision to establish a unified post-secondary institution with the passing of the Fiji National University Act (GoF, 2009).

System Building and National University Formation (2010 - 2015)

In 2010, FNU was created through the merger of six state institutions, including the Fiji Institute of Technology, Fiji School of Medicine, and Lautoka Teachers' College (GoF, 2009). In 2011, the merger of the TPAF and the Fiji Training Council into the National Training and Productivity Centre (NTPC) officially brought FNU into the fold. These consolidations represented an effort to create a single, coherent national university with comprehensive offerings across academic, vocational, and professional fields. USP remained central, but Fiji now had both a regional and a national university operating side by side. This period also saw growth in private providers, particularly in business and IT training, alongside continued faith-based and NGO training initiatives (Healey, 2020).

A significant turning point was the establishment of the Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC) in 2010 under the Higher Education Promulgation. The FHEC was mandated to regulate, register, and monitor higher education institutions, develop a national qualifications framework, and improve quality standards (FHEC, 2010). In 2011, the first iteration of the Fiji Qualifications Framework (FQF) was introduced (FHEC, 2023a). Finally, in 2014, the Fiji

Government passed the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Act to dedicate national budgetary resources to expand access to post-school education in Fiji and abroad (GoF, 2014).

Reform, Resilience, and Internationalisation (2016 - 2025)

Donor partnerships, including the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC), continue to shape technical and vocational training, especially in trades, tourism, and emerging fields such as renewable energy (APTC, 2021). Fiji further strengthened its international engagement when it ratified the Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (2011) on 19 February 2020, reinforcing its commitment to regional mobility and mutual recognition of qualifications (FHEC, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital learning and revealed systemic vulnerabilities, particularly around equitable access for rural learners (Alasa et al., 2022). Fiji's PSET sector has since prioritised resilience, labour-market relevance, and quality assurance. The Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC) continued to adapt the Fiji Qualifications Framework (QF) in 2017 and again in 2023, aligning it with the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF) to broaden regional and international recognition of credentials (FHEC, 2023a). These developments were guided by the long-term vision of the 2017-2036 Fiji National Development Plan, which emphasises inclusive growth, human capital development and global competitiveness (GoF, 2017).

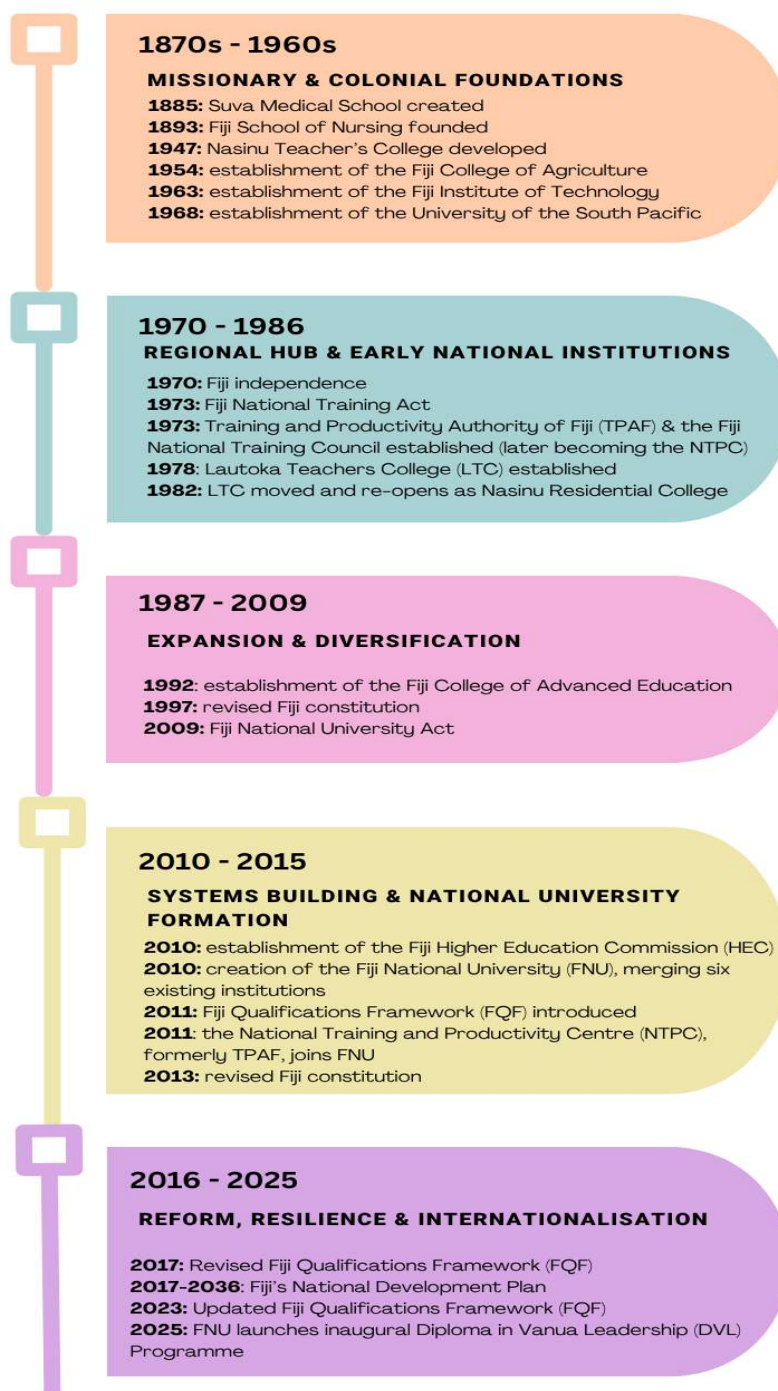
Both USP and FNU have expanded their online and blended delivery, while strengthening research and innovation in climate resilience, health, and sustainable development (FNU, 2024, 2025a; USP, 2021). In 2025, FNU launched its inaugural Diploma in *Vanua* Leadership (DVL) programme and hosted the first annual Indigenous knowledge conference, alongside the establishment of the FNU foundation, making a significant step towards integrating Indigenous epistemologies within institutional frameworks and promoting community-led research (FNU, 2025b, 2025c; SPC, 2025b).

Today, Fiji's PSET system is characterised by its dual structure with USP as the flagship regional university and FNU as the national university, complemented by a diverse array of public, private, and faith-based providers. Ongoing priorities include widening access for women, rural, and disadvantaged learners, embedding Indigenous knowledge alongside global standards, and ensuring PSET contributes directly to Fiji's national development and Pacific regional aspirations.

Figure 14.

PSET Development Timeline of Fiji

TIMELINE OF PSET DEVELOPMENT IN FIJI



Timeline of PSET Development in Fiji.
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Overview of PSET in Fiji

PSET in Fiji encompasses a diverse array of public, private, regional, and faith-based providers, reflecting the country's role as both a national education system and a hub for the wider Pacific. The sector spans universities, technical and vocational institutions, workplace-based learning, and community education programmes. Fiji's PSET landscape is also shaped by the coexistence of a national university, a regional university, numerous specialised providers, and strong external partnerships.

The governance of Fiji's PSET sector is centralised through the Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC). The FHEC oversees the registration and regulation of providers, programme accreditation, and alignment with the Fiji Qualifications Framework (FQF) (FHEC, 2020). The Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts (MEHA) oversees the broader education sector, while FHEC focuses specifically on tertiary and vocational education (Chandra, 2011; Kwan, 2020).

The Fiji Higher Education Strategy has emphasised expanding access, quality assurance, and labour-market relevance (FHEC, 2016). The Fiji Qualifications Framework (FQF), aligned to the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF) (SPC, 2015), ensures comparability of credentials across the region (FHEC, 2020). Government initiatives include the Tertiary Scholarships and Loan Service (TSLS), launched in 2014, which significantly expanded students' access to higher education domestically and abroad (Kwan, 2020). These financial schemes have been critical in improving enrolments, though concerns remain regarding equity of access and loan repayment. More recently, policy has focused on inclusive education, climate resilience, and digital transformation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with both FNU and USP investing in online and blended learning delivery (FNU, 2022; USP, 2021).

Fiji hosts many PSET institutions, with the two most prominent being FNU and USP, a regional university headquartered in Suva (Chandra, 2011; Marope et al., 2015; USP, 2018). This dual structure is unique in the Pacific, as Fiji serves simultaneously as a provider of national and regional higher education. Fiji's higher education landscape is broader and more institutionally diverse than a focus on the national and regional university may suggest. In addition to FNU and USP, the University of Fiji also forms part of the country's university sector, alongside a range of public, faith-based, and private PSET providers. Acknowledging this wider landscape is important, both to avoid overstating the centrality of any single institution, and to recognise

that higher education in Fiji is shaped by a plurality of higher educational institutional types and missions. It is also important to acknowledge that Fiji's higher education context is shaped by wider sociocultural and historical complexities, including questions of ethnicity, language, religion, and political histories. These dynamics shape the institutional environments and how they operate, although a full sociological analysis of those questions is beyond the scope of this thesis. Their significance is recognised here as part of the broader context within which national priorities and institutional identities are negotiated.

According to Fiji's Higher Education Commission at the time this document was prepared, there are 52 national qualifications, 965 provider qualifications, and 52 registered Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The current registered HEI providers (FHEC, 2023b) are as follows:

- Advance Aviation Training (Aviation School)
- Alphacrucis University College (Caregiving Institution)
- Australian Pacific Management and Training (Vocational School)
- Caregivers Training Institute (Caregiving Institution)
- Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development (Vocational School)
- Chevalier Training Centre (Vocational School)
- Church College Fiji of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Vocational)
- College of Theology and Evangelism Fiji (Theological School)
- Conservatorium of Dance (Performing Arts School)
- Cooperative College of Fiji (Training Centre)
- Corpus Christi Teachers College (Teacher Training Institute)
- Crest Academy (Training Institution)
- Davuilevu Theological College (Theological School)
- Fiji Airports Aviation Academy (Aviation School)
- Fiji Corrections Service Training Academy (Corrections Academy)
- Fiji Police Academy (Police Academy)
- Fulton Adventist University (University College)
- Institute of Democracy and Electoral Education (Electoral Education Institute)
- Keshals Business Education Institute (Computing School)
- Lumiere Academy (Health Wellness Training Institution)
- Macuata Divisional Bible and Vocational College (Bible College)

- Makoi Women’s Vocational Training Centre (Vocational Institution)
- Mauri Professional Caregiving Institute (Caregiver Institution)
- Methodist Deaconess Training Centre (Theological School)
- Ministry of Education (Vocational Institution)
- Ministry of Youth and Sports (Vocational School)
- Montfort Boy’s Town (Vocational School)
- Montfort Technical Training Institute - Savusavu (Vocational Institution)
- Navuso Agricultural Technical Institute (Vocational Institution)
- Pacific Flying School (Aviation School)
- Pacific Health & Skills Institute (Health and Skills Institute)
- Pacific Polytechnic (Polytechnic)
- Pacific Regional Seminary (Theological School)
- Pacific Technical Institute (Vocational Institution)
- Pasifika Communities University (Theological School)
- Pivot Point Fiji Institute (Training & Education)
- Prestige Skills Training Academy (Vocational Institution)
- Sangam Institute of Technology (School of Nursing)
- ServicePro International Tourism & Hospitality Institute (School of Hospitality)
- South Pacific Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine (School of Medicine)
- Spa Academy Fiji (Beauty Therapy School)
- St. John the Baptist Theological College (Theological School)
- The Fiji National University (University)
- The University of Fiji (University)
- The University of the South Pacific (University)
- Universal Academy of Beauty Therapy (Beauty Therapy School)
- Verve Lounge Training Academy (Beauty Therapy School)
- Vivekananda Technical Center (Vocational)
- Vivid Training Institute (Technical and Vocational Education Training Centre)
- Vuli Levu - Methodist Lay Training & Centre for Continuing Education (Bible College)
- World Harvest Institute (Bible School)

USP and FNU offer degree-level and postgraduate programmes across fields such as law, medicine, agriculture, education, science, business, and engineering. The country’s TVET sector remains a concern regarding quality, geographic access, course relevance, infrastructure,

and alignment with labour market needs. FNU and private providers focus TVET education and training mostly on trades, hospitality, ICT and business skills (DFAT, 2021). The Pacific Theological College (now called Pacific Communities University) and Fulton Adventist University College, for example, provide theological, health, and education programmes. NGOs and community-based organisations deliver training in literacy, entrepreneurship, and women's empowerment (FHEC, 2016). This diversification allows Fiji to meet national labour demands while also serving regional demands.

This thesis does not attempt a comprehensive analysis of the PSET sector in Fiji. It focuses specifically on Fiji National University because of its distinctive role as the national university and its particular relevance to the study's focus with how national priorities are articulated, negotiated and institutionalised. As a publicly established national institution with an explicit mandate in relation to workforce development, national planning, and public service contributions, FNU provides a distinctive lens through which to examine the relationships between national priorities, regional dynamics, and internationalisation. The focus on FNU should, therefore, be perceived as a deliberate case selection within a wider and more complex higher education landscape, not a claim that it exhausts that landscape.

Teacher shortages, capacity building for educators and upskilling qualifications remain key challenges across the education sector. Many TVET trainers are industry specialists with limited pedagogical training, while higher education academics often hold postgraduate qualifications obtained abroad (Marope et al., 2015). Professional development is supported through FHEC initiatives, donor programmes (e.g. APTC's upskilling), and institutional strategies at USP and FNU (DFAT, 2021). Gender imbalances persist, with fewer women in senior academic and technical teaching roles, though progress has been made in the health and education fields.

According to recent data, gross tertiary enrolment is moderate to high. In 2023, approximately 60.3% of eligible students were enrolled in tertiary education, a decline from about 68.4% in 2022. As of 2020, USP reported more than 30,000 students, including around 17,000 based in Fiji (USP, 2021). FNU enrolments stood at around 26,000 students, with most in vocational or undergraduate programmes (FNU, 2022). Private institutions, faith-based colleges, and community providers together account for an estimated 10,000-15,000 additional learners annually (FHEC, 2016). Despite the expansion, access remains unequal, with rural and outer-island students facing financial and geographic barriers (Mishra, 2017).

Scholarships, loans, and other financial aid mechanisms, such as the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLs), are in place. However, issues of affordability, equitable access (particularly for marginalised or rural students), and funding sustainability persist. Digital access is uneven. In more urban centres, internet access is relatively good, but in rural, maritime, and remote areas, connectivity and access to reliable energy/infrastructure are weaker, which constrains opportunities for remote or blended learning. Gender disparities are modest at the primary level but tend to widen in specific fields in higher education, especially STEM and high-cost-entry disciplines. Disability inclusion remains insufficiently addressed in many institutions. Physical access, specialised learning support, and inclusive pedagogy are inconsistent across campuses and provinces.

Pathways to PSET

Fiji has relatively high secondary school enrolments compared to other Pacific countries, but completion rates remain uneven. Around 80% of total students complete lower secondary, while only 54% complete upper secondary (UNICEF, 2024b). Students who do not transition into academic streams often access vocational training through FNU, community-based providers, or workplace apprenticeships. TVET is a significant pathway for school leavers. FNU's technical colleges and APTC provide certificate and diploma-level training aligned to labour market needs in hospitality, construction, and emerging industries. However, TVET continues to face challenges of low social status and underfunding compared to university education (ADB, 2008; Morris, 2015; Tagicakiverata, 2012).

Scholarship pathways remain central to Fiji's PSET system. The various schemes are mapped to strategic priority areas such as health, education, and STEM, with priority given to qualifications at Fiji's universities. In addition, bilateral scholarships from Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and China continue to influence graduate flows (Kwan, 2020; Schofield, 2015; TSLs, 2025).

PSET Completions

Completion rates remain a challenge. A 2017 FHEC review found that fewer than 50% of students completed their programmes on time, with attrition linked to financial pressures, academic preparedness, and competing work obligations (FHEC, 2016). Data from USP

indicate that trends in retention are improving due to the expansion of student support services, but disparities persist across gender, rural-urban divides, and disciplinary areas (USP, 2021).

Fiji National University (FNU)

While Fiji's higher education sector includes other PSET providers, this case study focuses on FNU because of its distinctive role as the national university and its particular relevance to the thesis's focus with the negotiation of national priorities. FNU was formally established in 2010 through the Fiji National University Act (GoF, 2009), as a consolidation of six



state-owned higher education institutions: Fiji Institute of Technology, Fiji School of Nursing, Fiji School of Medicine, Fiji College of Advanced Education, Lautoka Teachers' College, and the Fiji College of Agriculture. This merger created a unified national university under a single institutional framework, aligning with Fiji's strategic objectives for human resource development and education sovereignty (FNU, 2020).

FNU is Fiji's national university, mandated to provide higher education, research, and vocational training across a broad spectrum of disciplines. The university has a dual-sector character, combining academic programmes with technical and vocational education and training (TVET). This places FNU at the centre of Fiji's PSET landscape, tasked with producing skilled graduates for national, regional, and international labour markets (FNU, 2024).

The Fiji National University Act (GoF, 2009) articulates the university's purpose to:

- Provide accessible and affordable higher education;
- Develop knowledge, skills, and competencies relevant to national development;
- Advance research and innovation in areas of national and regional importance;
- Strengthen partnerships with industry, government, and international institutions; and,
- Promote Fijian identity, cultural knowledge, and regional solidarity.

FNU operates across multiple campuses nationwide, with its largest campus at Nasinu and specialised schools in Suva, Lautoka, Labasa, and other centres. It comprises five Colleges and two Institutes:

- College of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (CAFF)

- College of Business, Hospitality and Tourism Studies (CBHTS)
- College of Engineering, Science and Technology (CEST)
- College of Humanities, Education and Law (CHEL)
- College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS)
- National Training and Productivity Centre (NTPC)
- Fiji Maritime Academy (FMA)

Programmes range from certificates to doctoral degrees, with a strong emphasis on vocational and professional training. The CMNHS is particularly renowned as a regional hub for health professional education, attracting students from across the Pacific. The National Training and Productivity Centre (NTPC) provides workforce upskilling and professional development in alignment with Fiji’s national labour market priorities.

FNU’s current Strategic Plan (2024-2026) outlines five strategic priority areas (FNU, 2024, p.10):

1. Inclusiveness & Diversity: People, Place and Cultures
2. Educational Excellence and Student-Affirming Experiences in TVET and Higher Education
3. Research, Innovation, Social and Technological Development
4. Financial Sustainability, Endowment and Enterprise
5. Education for Employment and Internationalisation

Additionally, within this Strategic Plan, FNU has identified ‘spheres’, articulating a multi-scalar approach to their strategy, as well as key enablers of success (FNU, 2024, p.10):

- ❖ Spheres: Local, National, Regional & Global
- ❖ Enablers: People, Processes, Governance & Values

National Priorities

This section, consistent with the CPA framework detailed in Chapter 3, will analyse the role of the Fiji National University in the nation's broader development goals as articulated in national development plans, education sector strategies, and PSET policies. FNU is central to advancing Fiji’s 20-year National Development Plan (NDP) 2017-2036 and the five-year incremental plans, which emphasise inclusive growth, resilience, and a knowledge-based society. The table

below (Table 15) focuses on NDP Goal 6.3 (Education & Training) of the current five-year National Development Plan 2025-2029 (GoF, 2024) and maps it with FNU’s 2024-2026 strategic plan (FNU, 2024).

Table 15.

Mapping of the Fiji National Development Plan 2025-2029 and the FNU Strategic Plan 2024-2026

NDP 2025-2029 (GoF, 2024) G6.3: Education & Training	FNU SP 2024-2026 (FNU, 2024)
<p><i>“Integrate [I]ndigenous values, cultures, traditional knowledge, beliefs and skills across relevant curriculum” (p.114)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>“FNU is part of the lead committee that has developed the national plan for the [UN International Decade for Indigenous Languages and Cultures] for Fiji” (p.21)</i> ● <i>P1: “create direct synergies through inclusion and diversity to ensure the University Community is guided by our cultural, spiritual and Ocean heritage to achieve our goals” (p.39)</i> ● <i>P1 - KPI: “increase in research in traditional medicine and agricultural practices” (p.41)</i> ● <i>P1 - KPI: “Organise and hold, or support, conferences in Indigenous knowledge and national heritage” (p. 41)</i>
<p><i>“Training for teachers in a vernacular language” (p.114)</i></p>	<p>Not specifically mentioned</p>
<p><i>“Strengthen MATUA and TVET programmes” (p.114)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>“SP 2024-2026 will see the whole FNU TVET Pasifika portfolio undergoing accreditation” (p.17)</i> ● <i>P3: “Maintain high entry standards for degree programmes while building the quality of our TVET research, to ensure pathways into tertiary education for all students” (p. 48)</i>
<p><i>“Develop Teacher Competency Framework and Leadership Competency Framework” (p.114)</i></p>	<p>Not specifically mentioned</p>
<p><i>“Strengthen gender equitable delivery of TVET to learners with disabilities in urban, rural and maritime locations by mainstream training providers” (p.115)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>“...we pledge that through excellence in FNU’s TVET Pasifika, we will deliver to the marginalised, rural, remote and underprivileged areas of our populations” (p.17)</i>

<p><i>“Strengthen partnership with local communities, higher education institutions and relevant stakeholders” (p.115)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>P1: “The University Bure is to be part of this development and will be the organic link to all ideas around the celebration of multicultural inclusivity in the context of high education teaching, learning, research and engagement with our communities” (p. 40).</i> ● <i>Sphere 1 - Local: “Enhance engagement with the communities in which our campuses are located, fostering dialogue and collaboration with community leaders, groups and local employers” (p. 63).</i>
<p><i>“Enhance the effectiveness of TVET programmes to meet the evolving and future needs of the workforce including through incubator and innovative programmes” (p.115)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>“...TVET Pasifika has also launched its first four courses on AI for 2024” (p.20)</i> ● <i>P5: “FNU will produce graduates with entrepreneurial skills in the SME Sector” (p.56)</i> ● <i>P5: “Professionalism in sports education for employment generation and to position Fiji as a source of world-class athletes will be actively pursued” (p.56)</i> ● <i>P5: “FNU will adopt Appropriate and New Technology to raise overall efficiency and productivity and to improve service delivery across all areas like transportation, renewable energy, manufacturing, agriculture, ICT, education” (p.56)</i> ● <i>P5: “FNU will support the increased use of cloud computing, 3D printing, inter-networking of smart devices and other emerging technologies to improve efficiency and productivity” (p.56)</i>
<p><i>“Strengthen collaboration between the public and private sectors in the delivery of TVET” (p.115)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>P2: “Develop additional in-service training, short courses, executive and professional education, micro-credentials, and online programmes to support up-skilling, re-skilling, and enhanced productivity in the public and private sectors, as part of a lifelong approach to education and training” (p. 44).</i>
<p><i>“Support schools to offer vocational programmes as a pathway embedded in the school system” (p.115)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Sphere 2 - National: “Build links with feeder schools and colleges, to raise aspirations and encourage progression, and foster a high-quality educational ecosystem” (p. 64).</i>
<p><i>“Develop a specialised [TVET] curriculum for inclusive education” (p.115)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>“FNU will focus on literacy in education as well as inclusive education” (p.21)</i>

<p><i>“Introduce culture-focussed courses in traditional arts and crafts” (p.115)</i></p>	<p>Not specifically mentioned</p>
<p><i>“Strengthen apprenticeship scheme” (p.115)</i></p>	<p>Not specifically mentioned</p>
<p><i>“Integrate TVET by incorporating environmental sustainability principles” (p.115)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>P1 - KPI: “Expedite curricula that is contextual and takes cognizance of people’s livelihood and environmental sustainability” (p. 59)</i>
<p><i>“Review the National Qualifications relevant to industry needs” (p.115)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>“FNU inculcates both employment skills predicated on qualifications and credentials for specific jobs or professions, and also employability skills which are not job-specific but support employment opportunities in local or overseas contexts. Our graduates are industry ready” (p. 55)</i>
<p><i>“Review and strengthen higher education programmes to improve learning and teaching quality and educational experience” (p.116)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>P3: “Continue to enhance our learning and teaching, embedding global best practices research in pedagogy and assessment, building resilience in our delivery, and maximising the benefits of digital technologies” (p. 48).</i>
<p><i>“Set-up the Fiji National Research Council to promote research initiatives” (p.116)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>P3: “Identify a small number of key interdisciplinary themes, aligned to national priorities and with international relevance (‘from local to global’), where FNU can develop strength and depth in research” (p. 47).</i> ● <i>P3: “Develop our research capacity through training and mentorship programmes for research supervisors and early career researchers” (p. 47).</i> ● <i>P3: Invest in our research facilities, infrastructure, and culture, through carefully targeted support for priority areas and staff development” (p. 47).</i> ● <i>P3: “Build partnerships with overseas universities, governments, NGOs, and funders to finance internationally competitive, collaborative, challenge-based research.” (p. 47)</i> ● <i>P3: “Review our criteria for assessing research performance, in order to recognise the impact and positive contribute of practice-based research” (p. 47)</i>
<p><i>“Expand research intensity and productivity</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>P2 - KPI: “Provide incentives for high level academic</i>

<p><i>through publications produced by research active staff and higher degree research completions” (p.116)</i></p>	<p><i>publications” (p. 59)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>P2 - KPI: “Institute an outstanding Teaching and Research Awards for academic staff” (p. 45)</i>
<p><i>KPI: “Publication output per research active staff (FTE) - Annual 2025-2027 (3 years): 1 2025-2029 (5 years): 2” (p.116)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>P1: “Celebration of cultural traditions and practices by the University Community leading to production of research monographs, articles in periodicals and general populations (at least 2 events/publications per College/Centre annually up to 2026)” (p.60).</i>

It is also important to include a specific, multi-scalar approach to FNU’s strategy. In Sphere 1 (Local), they commit to their “...responsibility to the communities in which [they] operate, and to support local growth and opportunity” (p. 63). To hold themselves accountable to this responsibility, they indicate strategies to strengthen relationships with the communities surrounding their campuses, explore opportunities to share their facilities with those communities, and be more active and present in community activities.

In Sphere 2 (National), FNU understands their critical role in national development and commits to more substantial alignment between Fiji’s national priorities and its academic programmes, greater synergies across the education sector, integrating its knowledge and research for national service, and more strategically engaging with its growing alum network (FNU, 2024).

The university positions itself as a driver of inclusive development, with scholarships and access programmes targeting women, youth, and learners from rural and maritime communities. The university’s strategic goals align with these commitments in several key areas:

- **Human capital development:** Expanding higher education participation and workforce readiness in health, education, agriculture, tourism and technology;
- **Health workforce capacity:** Supporting health workforce training through CMNHS, strengthening medical services and getting closer to universal health coverage;
- **Inclusive access:** scholarships and bridging programmes targeting women youth, and rural/maritime learners, supporting the NDP’s goals of equitable development;
- **Research and innovation:** strengthening applied research in renewable energy, agriculture, climate adaptation, and disaster resilience; and

- **Digital and green transition:** FNU’s ICT modernisation and renewable green initiatives contribute to Fiji’s climate and sustainability goals.

The Fiji Higher Education Commission (HEC) has underscored these priorities in its annual reports, calling for quality assurance, institutional accountability, and stronger graduate tracking systems. FNU’s ongoing reforms align with HEC’s regulatory framework, though challenges persist in data collection and performance monitoring.

Regionalism

FNU aims to become Moana Oceania’s leading dual-sector university by aligning its efforts with regional workforce and innovation priorities. Between 2024 and 2026, it will strengthen academic and industry partnerships, enhance its regional standing through collaboration and active engagement, and expand student recruitment and educational networks (FNU, 2024). FNU plays an active role within Moana Oceania’s higher education landscape. It is a founding member of the Pacific Islands Universities Research Network (PIURN). It participates in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Vice Chancellors’ meetings, alongside the national universities of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu (MSG, 2024a, 2024b). These networks provide avenues for research collaboration, curriculum development and policy exchange. FNU is positioned both as a complement to and a competitor with USP. While USP has a regional mandate, FNU emphasises its national role as Fiji’s public university, prioritising Fijian students and workforce needs while also supporting regional needs and students. This dynamic reflects broader debates about sovereignty, solidarity, and competition in higher education across Moana Oceania.

Internationalisation

The FNU Strategic Plan 2024-2026 provides a clear articulation and mapping of the UN Sustainable Development Goals with their Academic Colleges and Institutions (FNU, 2024, pp. 27-29). It is also important to note they have stated their role with regards to the SDGs to provide “...a holistic educational mindset in our students so they are aware that local challenges are interrelated with regional and global dynamics and that solutions must take cognisance of these issues” (p. 28). In their view, the two primary metrics in determining the success of these alignments are student-centred teaching and learning, and academic research (FNU, 2024).

FNU seeks to strengthen its global presence by fostering international collaborations and contributing to solutions for worldwide challenges. From 2024 to 2026, it will pursue representation on global bodies, strategically work towards inclusion in major university rankings, and develop partnerships with international institutions that align with Fiji's national priorities (FNU, 2024).

Currently, FNU maintains partnerships with universities in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Asia and beyond. These include dual degree programmes, research collaborations, staff mobility, development assistance projects, and capacity building initiatives. Internationalisation provides FNU with access to resources, standards and networks. However, tensions arise when donor-driven priorities overshadow national imperatives, raising similar challenges to those faced by other Pacific national universities. FNU has therefore pursued a strategy of selective internationalisation, engaging global partners when synergies strengthen national and regional priorities, rather than uncritically adopting external models. Current international partnerships at FNU include:

- Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU)
- Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC)
- Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR)
- Beijing Normal University, China (student exchange & research collaborations)
- Cendrawasih University, Indonesia (student exchange & research collaborations)
- Charles Sturt University (research collaborations)
- Chubu University, Japan (research collaborations)
- College of Southern Nevada / Nevada National Guard, USA (training collaborations)
- Deakin University, Australia (research collaborations)
- James Cook University, Australia (research collaborations)
- Jamia Hamdard University, India (research collaborations)
- La Trobe University, Australia (research collaborations)
- Medical Services Pacific
- MIE University, Japan (research collaborations)
- Monash University, Australia (joint climate change research centre)
- National University of Samoa (research collaborations)
- Oral Health Pacific Island Alliance (OPIA)
- Pacific Action for Climate Transitions

- Pacific Community (SPC)
- Pacific Horticultural and Agricultural Market Access Plus (PHAMA Plus)
- RMIT University, Australia (research collaborations)
- Royal Australasian College of Physicians (research collaborations)
- Solomon Islands National University (SINU)
- Szent István University, Hungary (ERASMUS outgoing exchange)
- Tallinn Institute of Technology, Estonia (ERASMUS incoming exchange)
- Teesside University, UK (research collaborations)
- Think Pacific (Virtual Internship Programme)
- Universidade do Porto, Portugal (research collaborations)
- Universitas Pasundan, Indonesia (research collaborations)
- University of Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand
- University of Calcutta, India (research collaborations)
- University of Leeds, UK (outgoing short course)
- University of New South Wales (UNSW), Australia (research collaborations)
- University of Otago / Otago Global Health Institute (research collaborations)
- University of Valladolid, Spain (ERASMUS outgoing exchange)
- University of Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand (research collaborations)
- University of Wollongong, Australia
- University of Wyoming, USA (research collaborations)
- Victoria University of Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand (research collaborations)
- Vilnius University, Lithuania (research collaborations)

Collaborative Sensemaking: the Fiji Case Study

Consistent with the methodological commitments of *talanoa* outlined in Chapter 3, the collaborative sensemaking in Fiji was not treated as separate from relationship, but as part of an ongoing relational process through which institutional meanings, priorities, and tensions were interpreted with care, reciprocity, humility and relational accountability. In the Fiji case study, collaborative sensemaking was approached as an extension of the relational methodological commitments of the study, not a separate analytical phase. This involved remaining attentive to how meanings were shaped through relationships, institutional histories, and wider cultural and social complexities, and ensuring that interpretation preserved space for Indigenous and locally grounded meaning-making rather than rapid translation of participants’

narratives into external analytical frames. What follows traces how these voices and narratives illuminated Fiji's unique positioning as a nation seeking to advance its own development priorities, while also negotiating its responsibilities as a regional and global actor.

The Voices / Narratives (Participants and Process)

In Fiji, the research process was shaped by *talanoa*, a dialogic and culturally responsive methodology that privileges openness, trust, and reciprocity. These were not simply data-collection techniques but ethical commitments embedded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. As in other Moana Oceania contexts, consent was understood not as a single moment of agreement, but as an ongoing relational practice, nurtured through respect, humility, and attentiveness to participants' preferences and rhythms of engagement.

Participants included academic staff and leaders from FNU, government agencies engaged with the PSET and wider education sector, and respected community and sector voices. Their participation reflected Fiji's unique position as both a national and a regional education hub. Many participants spoke from the intersection of institutional responsibilities and cultural commitments, noting that their perspectives were inseparable from obligations to kin, *vanua*, and community.

The spaces of engagement were as significant as the narratives themselves. Some *talanoa* unfolded in formal spaces, such as offices and meeting rooms, where participants reflected on policy frameworks, donor priorities, and regional responsibilities. Others took place in less formal community and relational settings, where conversations naturally moved toward values of service, reciprocity, and the relational ethics underpinning education. In these latter contexts, participants drew more explicitly on lived experiences of navigating Fijian and other knowledge systems, offering insights that might not have surfaced in more structured environments.

All sessions were audio recorded (with consent), transcribed, and returned to participants for their review. This safeguarded participants' voices and ensured they retained ownership of their narratives. Preliminary thematic analyses were also shared with participants, inviting them to consent, refine, or affirm emerging insights. This iterative process reflected the *motutapu* principle of co-exploration, creating a relationally safe space to negotiate meaning together.

The process of collaborative sensemaking in Fiji wove together policy-focused insights with cultural narratives, producing a textured account of how higher education is experienced and imagined. It was through *talanoa* that participants made visible the relational, ethical, and cultural foundations underpinning their perspectives, highlighting the necessity of situating

university priorities not only within state strategies but also within the lived values and aspirations of Fijian communities. The collaborative sensemaking centres on how national priorities are negotiated, supported or challenged within FNU.

Emergent Themes

Participants' narratives highlighted both the opportunities and tensions of Fiji's unique positioning, anchoring in its own development goals, while simultaneously serving as a regional hub, and engaging global networks. The collaborative sensemaking is organised here across the three scalar categories of national priorities, regionalism, and internationalisation, each with emergent themes:

Centring National Priorities

- Historical Formation and Mandates
- Responding to National Workforce Needs
- Negotiating Curriculum and Indigenous Knowledge

Regionalism

- Complementarity or Competition with USP
- Shared Resources and Regional Standards
- Collective Resilience and Recovery

Internationalisation

- Global Recognition of Qualifications
- Leadership and Decolonisation of Practices
- Balancing Global Benchmarks and Local Realities

National Priorities, *Theme 1: Historical Formation and Mandates*

Participants framed the formation of FNU as a political response to perceived neglect within the regional system. As one senior leader recalled Fiji's determination to consolidate its own agenda:

“The government decided at that time, we want to have our own national university. So, what we'll do is put together the teacher training college, medical school, nursing school, TVET centre, and somehow they will form one university.”

(P31, University Employee)

This decision was framed as ultimately serving to align higher education with Fiji's development aspirations and sovereignty. This positioning underscores the university's

mandate to directly serve the nation's developmental goals, as articulated in the National Development Plan (NDP).

“One person wears multiple hats. That's the same in universities. The pool of qualified people is very small” (P39, Regional Organisation Employee).

The regional context adds complexity to the idea of institutional consolidation, primarily because FNU's mandate was implemented within a limited human resource base. While the establishment of national universities is a politically significant expression of sovereignty, these institutions operate in environments where staff capacity is often stretched, as one regional organisation employee noted, *“one person wears multiple hats”* (P39), and the pool of qualified personnel is small. Consequently, the goals set for national universities may be structurally too ambitious given the available capacity.

National Priorities, Theme 2: Responding to National Workforce Needs

Others highlighted how FNU continues to operationalise this mandate through its vocational and technical focus. One participant explained:

“Vocational and technical programmes at FNU particularly align with national workforce development goals, emphasising training in trades and professions critical for national growth” (P35, Government Employee)

This view reinforced the perception of FNU as a “people's university” closely tied to Fiji's economic and social development agenda.

“National Universities such as FNU align with Fiji's National Development Plan (NDP) by helping Fiji to aspire to ‘bringing a better quality of life for all Fijians’. In this sense, the national university provides tertiary education that is relevant, quality-based and transformational for all its learners. As a result, it contributes to the improvement in social well-being and prosperity” (P34, Government Employee).

Expanding the concept of FNU as a *“people's university”* beyond mere skills supply and employability, this participant contribution explicitly frames the national university as a tool for enhancing quality of life, social well-being, and prosperity. By emphasising social and relational outcomes alongside workforce development, the argument is strengthened that the alignment between the NDP and FNU is not just technical, but fundamentally ethical and redistributive.

“The general population views FNU as a key institution in the country for higher education and skills development. Overall, the general sentiment towards FNU is positive, with many people recognising its importance in helping to improve education”

standards and provide opportunities for personal and professional growth” (P33, Government Employee).

This participant frames their sensemaking around connecting public perception with personal and professional development opportunities. Rather than accepting FNU as a lesser choice, the focus is on skill enhancement and educational quality. This perspective demonstrates that national priorities are interpreted not just through policy alignment, but significantly through community trust and expectation.

National Priorities, Theme 3: Negotiating Curriculum and Indigenous Knowledge

At the level of pedagogy, some participants described the struggle of embedding Indigenous knowledge in national teacher training curricula:

“We tell them that mathematics is not detached from culture...but when they go back, the Ministry curriculum pulls them to square one.” (P30, University Employee)

This shared narrative captures a recurring tension. Even as national universities attempt to decolonise curricula, state evaluation frameworks often reproduce Euro-Western norms. The result is a cycle where localised pedagogies are marginalised, undermining attempts to Indigenise education.

“I think the Indigenous always fits within the informal education...knowledge holders don’t find that they have a place in formal education settings...that’s also something that has to be decolonised” (P39, Regional Organisation Employee).

The struggle over curriculum in Fiji is simultaneously epistemic and political, highlighting a tension over which knowledge systems are legitimised and what constitutes formal knowledge. This issue is deepened by colonially informed structures that categorise Indigenous knowledge as *“informal education,”* a sentiment echoed by other participants' frustration regarding the adoption of foreign curricular and assessment frameworks. Labelling the necessary systemic change as *“decolonising”* education emphasises that the core problem is not just a content mismatch, but a challenge to institutional categories and established educational spaces.

These narratives illustrate that while FNU has been designed as an instrument of national development, the project is ongoing and contested, shaped by historical and colonial legacies and by contemporary constraints.

Regionalism, Theme 1: Complementarity or Competition with USP

Participants also situated Fiji's higher education system within broader Moana Oceania regionalism, noting both the opportunities and the frictions of co-existing with USP,

"Sometimes when Fiji proposes something that will be beneficial to Fiji, it's always pushed aside...So the government has been planning to do this, to have its own national university where its national priorities are looked after." (P31, University Employee)

This reflected a perception that USP's regional mandate could dilute Fiji's national agenda, while FNU was designed to complement, or at times, compete with, the regional institution. The creation of FNU was not only about nation-building, but also about recalibrating Fiji's influence in regional governance. The sentiment of competition is further underscored by P34 (a Government Employee), who noted that *"Fiji gives large contributions to USP that could have been invested in its national university."* This critique highlights the concrete fiscal trade-offs inherent in hosting a regional institution, thereby sharpening the perception of rivalry between FNU and USP. While this does not constitute a rejection of regional solidarity, the participant's comment emphasises how public funds directed toward USP may be viewed as a foregone investment in the national university. This perspective intensifies the already-existing tensions surrounding sovereignty and priority-setting in the Fiji case study.

Regionalism, Theme 2: Shared Resources and Regional Standards

Participants working in regional policy settings emphasised how shared resources and collaborative frameworks can strengthen capacities within Fiji's universities:

"Regional initiatives under the Pacific Regional Education Framework aim to harmonise educational standards...this ensures that students in Fiji gain qualifications recognised across the Pacific." (P35, Government Employee)

Yet, others noted resistance to recognising peer institutions' qualifications, highlighting protectionist instincts within a discourse of regional cooperation (P36, Regional Organisation Employee).

"Collaboration with other Pacific Island countries...regionalism fosters cooperation and collaboration, providing FNU with opportunities to partner with other universities and research institutions in the region. This can result in sharing resources, expertise, and best practices, which can enhance the quality of education and research at FNU" (P35, Government Employee).

This viewpoint regards regionalism as an opportunity to enhance FNU's quality and research profile, rather than merely a compliance obligation. It aligns with the positive side of regionalism, counterbalancing more cautious perspectives that focus on competition and standardisation. The participant's framing emphasises PacREF and related frameworks as valuable instruments for context-specific capacity building, provided they are engaged on Fiji's own terms.

Regionalism, Theme 3: Collective Resilience and Recovery

Regionalism also emerged in accounts of community-level impacts:

“After those cyclones, we heard...that in places where we had already done training, they were the fastest to recover... because the youth and the people in the village already knew what they could do.” (P31, University Employee)

Here, regional networks of support were seen as amplifying national resilience during crises. These narratives reveal regionalism as both enabling and constraining, a source of shared strength and standardisation, but also a site of competition and contestation.

Internationalisation, Theme 1: Global Recognition of Qualifications

Several participants highlighted the challenge of aligning with global standards while retaining contextual relevance:

“USP and FNU degrees are really well recognised across the Pacific, but probably not outside it...this tension between wanting to have our own and wanting others to recognise it.” (P36, Regional Organisation Employee)

The desire for international mobility coexisted uneasily with the need to safeguard local relevance.

Internationalisation, Theme 2: Leadership and Decolonisation in Practice

One participant spoke of leadership shifts at FNU as a space for rethinking dominant models:

“Over the last ten years...heads have come from overseas...This vice chancellor that we have now is the first Indigenous woman...she brings in the idea of Indigenous cultures and traditions but also critiques them.” (P32, University Employee)

This moment was narrated as both symbolic and pragmatic: a recognition of the importance of decolonial leadership while retaining a critical stance towards cultural essentialism.

Internationalisation, Theme 3: Balancing Global Benchmarks and Local Realities

Participants also noted the structural pressures of benchmarking against global norms:

“You can’t really benchmark when the motivations of a university are quite different...but you also still want to be relevant locally and globally as well.”

(P30, University Employee)

This underscored the difficulty of navigating between international visibility and national accountability, where global rankings and benchmarking are misaligned with the contextual missions of national universities, yet challenging to resist. Internationalisation was thus narrated as aspiration and risk. It can serve as a pathway to recognition and resources, but one that can easily subordinate local priorities if not carefully negotiated.

The narratives from Fiji reveal higher education as a site where national sovereignty, regional solidarity, and international recognition are constantly negotiated. Participants highlighted the centrality of FNU in advancing national development, while also reflecting on the ambivalences of regional and international engagements. Their voices underscored that universities in Fiji are more than academic institutions; they are political and cultural actors, deeply embedded in the struggle to define what relevance, recognition, and responsibility mean in Fiji and Moana Oceania today. Participants believe that the national university is a site where questions of sovereignty, belonging and recognition are contested and reimaged. The themes identified are relationally interpreted, co-developed understandings shaped through dialogues, accountability, and contexts.

Research Significance and Implications

The Fiji case study illustrates how collaborative sensemaking unfolds within a context where higher education is inseparable from cultural, political, and regional dynamics. FNU occupies a distinctive position within Moana Oceania’s higher education landscape. As a relatively young national university, FNU symbolises Fiji’s assertion of educational sovereignty and the desire to align tertiary education with inclusive national development. Its dual-sector mandate, combining TVET and degree-level higher education, reflects an intentional strategy to address diverse national priorities, from immediate labour-market needs to long-term capacity-building. Although it has a clear focus on serving Fijian nationals, FNU’s reputation and diverse programmes have earned great respect and interest throughout the region, positioning it as both a knowledge hub and an engine of workforce development.

This case study highlights the ongoing tensions and possibilities inherent in FNU's role. On one hand, it is tasked with advancing national human resource development and embedding Indigenous knowledge systems. On the other hand, it must navigate the weight of global academic benchmarks, donor-driven agendas, and its complex coexistence with USP. In this way, FNU exemplifies the challenges facing national universities across Moana Oceania: how to remain nationally relevant, regionally connected, and globally recognised, without losing their cultural grounding and social purpose.

Reflections on Research in Fiji

Engaging *talanoa* and collaborative sensemaking in Fiji underscored the significance of relational ethics in research. Participants emphasised that higher education is not an abstract policy terrain, but intimately tied to *vanua*, kinship obligations, and community well-being. This required methodological attentiveness to space and process. Whether in formal Ministry offices or informal community settings, participants brought forward insights shaped by their multiple roles as professionals, family members, and community leaders.

What distinguished the Fiji case was the recurring theme of duality, Fiji's position as both a sovereign nation with its own priorities and as host to a major regional university. This duality produced reflections that were often comparative and sometimes contested, highlighting both the opportunities of Fiji's hub role and the risks of its national agenda being overshadowed. Several participants described this as a balancing act, requiring attentiveness to community relevance at home, while negotiating regional and international expectations that sometimes risk overshadowing local priorities. For the research process, this demanded constant reflexivity, ensuring that analysis did not simply reproduce dominant regional narratives, but remained grounded in participants' own accounts of FNU's evolving role.

Emerging and Continuing Priorities

Participants' narratives from Fiji reveal several enduring and emerging priorities for higher education. Human capital and workforce development remain paramount, with FNU positioned as a central institution for producing skilled graduates to meet national needs in health, education, agriculture, engineering and tourism, an identity frequently encapsulated in its characterisation as a "people's university." Participants consistently emphasised the importance of embedding Indigenous knowledge and cultural identity within curricula and pedagogy.

Rather than defaulting to Euro-Western models, higher education is expected to affirm Fijian values, epistemologies and ways of being, ensuring that teaching, learning and research are grounded in local knowledge systems and responsibilities to *vanua* and community.

Given Fiji's vulnerability to climate change, climate resilience and sustainability also emerged as non-negotiable priorities. Universities are increasingly expected to generate research and deliver programmes that support adaptation, mitigation and disaster preparedness, linking scientific, technical and Indigenous knowledge in ways that directly serve communities. Participants further highlighted equitable access and inclusion as critical, particularly the need to expand opportunities for rural, maritime and marginalised learners, address persistent gender disparities, and better support students with disabilities through inclusive infrastructure, pedagogy and support services. Central to these concerns is the strategic positioning of Fijian higher education within regional and international systems. Balancing national sovereignty with regional solidarity and global recognition is seen as a continuing priority, requiring Fiji's institutions to negotiate carefully between asserting local relevance and securing broader legitimacy and portability of qualifications.

Challenges

FNU's experience also highlights a series of persistent and interrelated challenges. The University must sustain its mission as a national "people's university" while navigating mounting pressures from global standards, donor agendas, and regional competition, all while ensuring that Indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, and national development priorities remain central rather than peripheral. FNU's dual-sector mandate sharpens this tension, as it seeks to balance its foundational role in TVET with its expanding degree-level higher education portfolio, often under competing funding, regulatory and policy expectations.

These pressures are compounded by concerns about financial sustainability, given the institution's dependence on fluctuating state subsidies and variable student enrolments, and by the ongoing need to strengthen research capacity and visibility in ways that meet global benchmarks while remaining grounded in Fiji's specific contexts and development needs. Persistent issues of access and equity further shape FNU's future, particularly for rural and maritime learners, where infrastructure, connectivity and affordability continue to constrain participation and success. Finally, the university must continually negotiate its coexistence with USP. This relationship offers important opportunities for collaboration but also generates

tensions over questions of sovereignty, competition, and institutional duplication within a small, tightly interconnected higher education system, both nationally and regionally.

Opportunities

Participants also identified numerous opportunities for FNU. Through the College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, FNU is well placed to consolidate and extend its role as a regional leader in the training of health professionals, contributing directly to national and Moana Oceania health priorities. There is also considerable scope for further research on renewable energy, resilience, and sustainability, positioning FNU as a hub for applied research that addresses Fiji's and the wider region's climate-related and development challenges through approaches relevant to communities and that influence policy.

Opportunities also exist to strengthen the university's contribution to workforce and productivity training. The National Training and Productivity Centre offers a platform for training and skills development aligned with industry needs, thereby enhancing Fiji's human capital and economic resilience. At the regional level, FNU's participation in networks such as PIURN and MSG creates pathways for collaboration that reinforce national and regional capacities. Additionally, a more selective and strategic approach to internationalisation enables FNU to engage with global partners to access resources, expertise and recognition, while maintaining a clear commitment to Fiji's priorities and safeguarding knowledge sovereignty.

Research Futures

Looking ahead, the Fiji case study underscores several significant implications for both research and practice. Sustaining financial resilience while maintaining equitable access will remain central to the long-term viability of Fiji's national university. As pressures on resources and expectations evolve, achieving a balance between financial sustainability and social inclusion will be a continuing challenge that demands innovative governance and funding models attuned to Fiji's local realities.

Equally, the deep integration of Indigenous knowledge systems and national priorities into curricula and research will be essential to advancing educational sovereignty. This process requires more than tokenistic inclusion; it calls for a reorientation of pedagogical and institutional frameworks to foreground Fiji's epistemological and cultural foundations. In doing

so, the university can serve as a site for the regeneration of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, strengthening both national identity and intellectual autonomy.

Reframing regionalism also emerges as a critical consideration. Moving beyond a stance of competition with USP towards one of genuine complementarity could enhance Fiji's position as both a national and regional education hub. Such an approach would enable collaborative innovation, shared capacity-building, and more coherent regional development in higher education, rooted in the principle of collective advancement rather than rivalry.

In the same vein, interrogating internationalisation must remain a central scholarly and policy concern. Rather than embracing globalisation as the wholesale adoption of external norms and practices, Fiji's higher education sector can pursue selective, reciprocal partnerships that advance its national development agenda. This implies cultivating transnational collaborations that are mutually beneficial, respectful of local agency, and grounded in shared values rather than asymmetrical dependency.

Future comparative research across Moana Oceania could further illuminate how national universities navigate these tensions between global engagement, local sovereignty, and regional collaboration. Such inquiry should attend carefully to the distinctiveness of each context, recognising that while common patterns exist, the articulation of higher education futures remains shaped by unique historical, cultural, and political dynamics.

Ultimately, the Fiji case affirms that national universities in Moana Oceania are more than educational institutions. They are dynamic arenas in which sovereignty, cultural identity, and development futures are actively negotiated and reimagined. Ongoing research must therefore centre relational ethics, Indigenous epistemologies, and collaborative sensemaking to ensure that the voices and aspirations of Pacific peoples guide the evolving direction of higher education across the region.

Chapter 9. Sensemaking (Discussion)

Introduction

Every *vaka*³⁷ begins its voyage from a known shore, guided by stars, tides, and stories passed down through generations (Fa’avae et al., 2021; Iosefo et al., 2021; Koya-Vaka’uta, 2017). This research has navigated the vast and shifting waters of Moana Oceania’s higher education landscape, journeying alongside five national universities whose courses are steered by the currents of national priorities, regional cooperation, and global expectations. The national universities of Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji hold distinct mandates rooted in place, culture, and history. Each of them, however, faces the shared challenge of negotiating the inherited structuring of knowledge exchange that often privileges Euro-Western epistemologies. The research journey has been one of relational learning, reciprocity, and resistance, with national universities asserting themselves as both a vessel and a navigator of knowledge sovereignty and Indigenous self-determination.

This discussion chapter weaves the sensemaking threads across the five case studies presented in the previous chapters: Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji. They offer a multi-contextual, descriptive case study analysis of how national universities within Moana Oceania negotiate the intersections of national priorities, regionalism and internationalisation. This chapter seeks to interpret these findings through collaborative sensemaking, a methodological and ethical process that privileges relational engagement, participants’ narratives, and Indigenous worldviews. To be clear, this is not a comparative analysis, as contexts are central, and it would be counter to the research design to present the findings in this manner. The subsequent cross-case synthesis aims for analytical generalisations, rather than empirical comparisons. Its purpose is not to assert that it represents all national universities in Moana Oceania. Instead, the goal is to pinpoint patterns and tensions that clarify how universities within the region manage multi-scalar priorities. The chapter presents both a synthesis of the findings and a reflexive exploration of meaning-making, demonstrating how the research contributes to broader debates on higher education, decolonisation, epistemic sovereignty and culturally informed research design.

³⁷ boat, vessel, canoe, sailing vessel. The word originates, and with some variation, in some Polynesian languages.

Drawing on *motutapu* (Johansson-Fua, 2020) and *wansolwara* (Johansson-Fua, 2022), the discussion situates sensemaking within Moana Oceania ontologies of shared places, values and movements. *Motutapu* reminds us that knowledge is sacred, relational and grounded in land, language and community. *Wansolwara* gestures to the shared ocean that connects and sustains Moana Oceania peoples, an ever-shifting space of dialogue, adaptation, and mutual care. These frameworks guide the interpretive analysis that follows, enabling the discussions to move between islands of contexts and oceanic spaces of connection. Anchored by social constructionism, critical Indigenous ethnography, and *talanoa/tok stori/storian*, the chapter embraces a methodology of relational knowing and ethical storytelling.

In keeping with the intent to foreground national and Indigenous contexts, I return to the core inquiry that has guided the research: ***How are national priorities centred in national universities of Moana Oceania?*** Building from this, the discussion also examines the question: ***What impact do regionalism and internationalisation have on achieving national priorities at national universities in Moana Oceania?*** These questions anchor the interpretive analysis that follows, drawing connections between institutional positionalities, regional collaborations, and global structures, while maintaining the relational integrity and ethical grounding that have shaped the research from its inception.

Overview of Key Findings

Across the five case studies, three interconnected findings emerge that illuminate how national, regional, and global dynamics shape the work of national universities in Moana Oceania. The three sections that follow, on national priorities, regionalism, and internationalisation, bring together the findings that emerged from participants' narratives, collaborative sensemaking and the critical policy analysis (CPA). At the national level, institutions consistently anchor their missions to cultural identity, national service, and community relevance. Academic development was understood not as an abstract pursuit, but as a contribution to nation-building, moral leadership, and the strengthening of Indigenous worldviews and values.

At the regional scale, participants expressed both appreciation for and frustration with existing mechanisms of cooperation. While institutions such as the University of the South Pacific and frameworks like PacREF offer opportunities for shared learning, their perceived distance from national realities often limits their effectiveness in supporting national priorities. Nevertheless, the potential of regionalism endures when framed through cultural solidarity, particularly the

ethos of *wansolwara*, which emphasises shared oceanic identity, reciprocity, and collective care (PIFS, 2014, 2024b).

At the global level, internationalisation was described as a space of uneven opportunity. Global partnerships could reinforce hierarchies, donor dependency, and epistemic imbalance, but they could also be reclaimed as strategic pathways for promoting Indigenous scholarship and ethical collaboration. Participants stressed the need to shift from transactional arrangements to relational partnerships grounded in mutual respect, local leadership, and shared goal setting.

Synthesising these threads, three core findings stand out:

- **National Priorities:** National universities act as sites of nation-building, where education is inseparable from cultural identity, collective service and epistemic sovereignty.
- **Regionalism:** Regional cooperation holds transformative potential when rooted in cultural kinship rather than bureaucratic conformity.
- **Internationalisation:** Global engagement becomes empowering when guided by reciprocity, ethical practice and Indigenous leadership.

Together, these findings affirm that centring Indigenous worldviews enables national universities to move from peripheral adaptation to epistemic leadership, shaping not only their own futures, but also the evolving landscape of higher education across Moana Oceania.

The first section turns to the shore from where each *vaka* sets sail, the ‘National’. Here, the discussion explores how the five national universities articulate their institutional identity through mandates that weave development priorities, cultural continuity, and Indigenous values. By examining how leadership, governance, and curriculum enact national purpose, this section considers how each institution claims and performs its role as a national university through cultural identity, service to the community and sovereignty. It reveals the balancing act between being a mirror of national aspiration and a mediator of external influences, where the currents of policies, politics, and peoples continuously shape institutional identity. In tracing these movements, the analysis foregrounds the emergence of critical consciousness and leadership practices that are deeply contextual, collectively held, and grounded in local epistemologies.

Centring National Priorities: Institutional Identity and Positionality

Each *vaka*, before setting out, must know its own island and the surrounding seas, as its point of departure and its site for return. For national universities of Moana Oceania, that home is the nation itself, a site of belonging, obligation, and self-definition. Across Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji, national universities articulate their identity and positionality through explicit commitments to national service, cultural grounding, and the pursuit of knowledge that strengthens community well-being. Their mandates, strategies and public narratives position them as both instruments of nation-building and embodiments of Indigenous philosophy. In this sense, they are not simply educational institutions, but expressions of self-determination, reflections of how people and governments imagine the purpose of higher learning in sovereign and evolving contexts.

Across all five case studies, participants described their universities as institutions of and for the people. The examples that follow illustrate that national universities are increasingly reflecting nationhood, negotiating inherited colonial frameworks while striving to re-centre Indigenous values and relational ethics. At the heart of this negotiation lies the ethic and original purpose of universities, of serving the public good (Scott, 2006). Participants across contexts emphasised that higher education holds legitimacy only when it improves the lived realities of the people it serves. Systematic challenges (e.g. under-resourced facilities, fragmented leadership, colonial educational legacies) continue, however, to constrain the realisation of these aspirations (Escobar, 1988, 1995). The persistence of urban-rural inequities, particularly acute in places such as Honiara (Solomon Islands) and the outer islands, reveals the unfinished task of educational equity and access. These tensions underscore the ongoing need for critical consciousness within institutional leadership, an awareness that national service requires both humility and courage to question inherited hierarchies of knowledge, language, and authority.

Samoa

Samoa's sensemaking at the national level reveals a university system deeply entangled with *fa'a Samoa*, where tertiary education is understood not merely as a public service, but an ethical and relational responsibility. The National University of Samoa (NUS) is shaped by a governance ecology in which the *fa'amatai* (chiefly) system, Christian institutions, and national development priorities interact continuously. Participants emphasised that national identity is

not an abstract value but a living framework that shapes how decisions are made, programmes are prioritised, and relationships within and beyond the university are enacted.

NUS embodies a distinctly Samoan understanding of the purpose of tertiary education. Its legitimacy rests on its responsiveness to national needs, a responsibility heightened by the country's youthful population, persistent rural-urban disparities, and the pressures of limited economic diversification. Leaders described their work as serving the community, protecting cultural integrity, and strengthening local capacity so that Samoans can lead their own institutions rather than rely on external expertise. This positioning reinforces the argument that national universities act as mirrors and mechanisms of nationhood, bearing the ethical responsibility to safeguard national aspirations.

National pressures are not without friction. Participants identified fragmentation in national education governance as a barrier to long-term system coherence. The existence of parallel policies, duplicated mandates, and separate quality assurance frameworks dilutes the ability of national priorities to translate into coordinated sectoral actions. At an institutional level, NUS staff spoke of resource constraints, heavy teaching workloads, and the ongoing challenge of balancing expectations for globally recognised programmes with curricula grounded in Samoan epistemologies.

Despite these tensions, the Samoan case demonstrates a strong commitment to epistemic sovereignty. For many participants, the renewal of curricula, expansions in ICT capacity, and sector reforms must be anchored in Samoan cultural values, not merely in external models. The call is not for isolation, but for alignment; an insistence that the values of *vā*, reciprocity, and collective well-being shape the university's contribution to development. In this sense, Samoa illustrates a national university navigating inherited structures while actively re-centring Indigenous thought as both a grounding and generative force.

Tonga

The Tongan case underscores how a national university is more than an administrative entity; it is shaped by the moral, cultural, and political architectures that structure national life. Tonga's higher education ecosystem is deeply embedded in *anga fakatonga*, where *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *fetokoni'aki* (reciprocity), and *tauhi vā* (care for relational space) shape expectations for leadership, decision-making, and educational purpose. These values are not peripheral cultural accents but organising principles that define what it means for a university to serve the nation.

Participants described the newly established Tonga National University (TNU) as an institution still searching for its centre. Many spoke of fragmentation across the merged institutes, a lack of clear strategic direction, and the persistence of siloed practices since consolidation. This fragmentation was experienced not simply as an administrative issue, but as a challenge to institutional identity. Without a unifying vision, participants worried that TNU remained a university ‘in name only’, unable yet to embody its intended role as a national driver of development, knowledge production, and cultural continuity,

The influence of cultural hierarchy within governance emerged strongly. A top-down model of leadership, rooted in Tonga’s broader socio-political structures, generated tensions between authority and collective expertise. Younger professionals, often internationally qualified and eager to contribute, described the difficulty of offering new ideas within entrenched hierarchical relationships. This dynamic highlighted the dual nature of *tauhi vā*: while relational care can strengthen cohesion, it can also inhibit critique, slowing and complicating institutional transformation.

Despite these tensions, the ambition for a culturally grounded national university was clear. Participants emphasised that national priorities, particularly workforce preparation in health education, construction, tourism and aged care, must be pursued in ways that honour Tongan values and safeguard Tongan identity. The desire for a relational, culturally resonant university was strong. Participants articulated a vision in which governance, curriculum design, and partnerships would be rooted in *anga fakatonga* rather than imported managerial templates.

The path to that vision is constrained by limited institutional capacity, insufficient access to research and scholarly resources, and the systemic challenge of national human resource shortages. The difficulty of accessing academic journals and research databases, for example, was described as both a practical barrier and epistemic inequity, reinforcing Tonga’s peripheral position in the global knowledge economy.

The Tongan case thus illuminates how the formation of a national university is an ongoing act of negotiation. It requires attending not only to policy and structure, but to cultural ethics, generational knowledge, and epistemic sovereignty. TNU’s future trajectory will require a coherent identity and strategy, guided by both national priorities and the relational philosophies that sit at the heart of Tongan life.

Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands case presents the reality of a national university operating within a geographically scattered, culturally diverse, and structurally uneven national landscape.

Participants repeatedly framed the Solomon Islands National University (SINU) through the national motto, 'To Lead is to Serve', emphasising humility, service, and relational responsibility as the moral bedrock of educational leadership. The university is imagined not simply as a site of credential production, but as a *malamute*, a sheltering presence that supports community wellbeing and community resilience.

National identity surfaced strongly as a guiding anchor. Participants described higher education as most legitimate when it draws from *kastom*, community obligations, and relational ethics embedded in chiefly responsibilities. This ethic of care shaped expectations of SINU. Its programmes should strengthen villages, restore disrupted knowledge systems, and prepare graduates for service rather than status. Academic courses such as *Solomon Islands Studies* were celebrated as correctives to inherited colonial curricula, demonstrating how Indigenous knowledge, resilience practices, and genealogies of place can be recentred within tertiary education.

The national landscape, however, is marked by pronounced inequalities. Participants spoke with candour about the widening gap between Honiara and the provinces. Students arriving from rural areas often struggled with English proficiency, laboratory-based sciences, and academic writing, describing transitions to tertiary study as a leap between two worlds. These disparities were not framed as individual deficits but as structural injustices that limit tertiary education's ability to act as a genuine national institution.

Participants understood the national priorities, particularly those embedded in the National Development Strategy and the National Human Resource Development Plan. However, their realisation was hindered by systemic fragilities. Participants identified limited infrastructure, uneven quality across the PSET system, and dependence on donor-funded initiatives as challenges. They also discussed the fragmentation of planning processes, noting that educational priorities often followed the availability of external funding, rather than arising from national consciousness.

Despite these challenges, the Solomon Islands case demonstrates a strong, unmistakable aspiration that national identity, *kastom*, and community relevance must shape the university's future. *Tok stori*, as both epistemology and ontology, is central to this vision. Participants framed it as a relational practice that offers not only an ethical research methodology but also a guide for governance, curriculum design, and national dialogue. The Solomon Islands case highlights a national university actively seeking to move from external dependency towards epistemic sovereignty, anchored firmly in land, language, and relational ethics.

Vanuatu

The emergence of the National University of Vanuatu (NUV) is another illustration of a nation seeking to consolidate sovereignty, cultural identity, and developmental aspirations within a single institutional form. Participants described NUV as both symbol and scaffold, a national project imbued with political hope, yet constrained by the realities of limited staffing, unstable resourcing, fragmentation, and the practical difficulties of institution-building in a multi-island state. The university's infancy was palpable in the narratives: a small team, heavy administrative burdens, and competing expectations of what a national university should immediately deliver.

National priorities are unambiguously centred at NUV. The People's Plan, VETSS, and the National Human Resources Development Plan position higher education as an enabling force for inclusive development, labour-market relevance, cultural continuity, and climate-resilient futures. NUV sits at the centre of this vision. Participants framed the university as an instrument of service, rather than prestige, echoing familiar Melanesian ethics of leadership rooted in humility, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. The emphasis was not on becoming a competitive global institution, but on consolidating PSET pathways, improving national capacities, strengthening teacher education, and aligning programmes with societal needs in agriculture, health, tourism, technology, and environmental stewardship.

The Vanuatu case study also centred a strong commitment to *kastom*, a way of understanding knowledge, land, personhood, and relational obligations. Participants expressed a desire to weave *kastom* and Indigenous languages into the university's formal structures, recognising that multilingualism and place-based knowledge are not cultural ornaments, but foundational epistemologies. Embedding *kastom* within an institution shaped by global expectations of scholarship is deeply challenging. The divide between what counts as 'formal' academic knowledge and what is held within community, land, and lineage persists. Participants highlighted the need to dismantle this separation so that *kastom* knowledge can occupy legitimate space within curriculum research agendas, and institutional identity.

NUV's bilingual mandate (English and French) encapsulates the complexity of building a national university that must remain regionally legible while honouring local linguistic realities. Participants were clear that language politics continually intersect with epistemic politics. If the university is not vigilant, the dominant language can suppress vernacular ways of knowing, perpetuating colonial legacies within the very institution intended to advance national self-determination.

Across the *storian*, the narrative of Vanuatu is one of courage wrapped in constraint. NUV is a bold act of sovereignty, but its future stability depends on sustained political commitment, careful consolidation of existing PSET institutions, and an unwavering focus on *kastom*, linguistic diversity, and community relevance. The case highlights that national universities are not merely built but continually negotiated and shaped by the ambitions and vulnerabilities of the nations they serve.

Fiji

The Fiji case illustrates a national higher education landscape shaped by duality: Fiji National University (FNU), operating as the country's educational instrument of national development, and the University of the South Pacific's (USP) main campus, simultaneously positioned within Fiji's borders as a regional institution. This dual structure gives Fiji a unique vantage point in Moana Oceania, but it also produces tensions about sovereignty, priority-setting, and the role of a national university. This discussion should also be understood within a wider university landscape that also includes the University of Fiji and other PSET providers, even though the institutional focus of the case study remains FNU.

Participants described the creation of FNU as an exercise in educational self-determination, a deliberate attempt to consolidate a disparate PSET system and ensure that regional agendas no longer overshadowed Fiji's priorities. The merger of multiple specialised colleges into a single institution was framed as a necessary act of coherence. Participants also acknowledged the institutional complexities that remain. For example, siloed academic cultures, uneven quality, heavy teaching loads and the ongoing challenge of weaving together a national identity across diverse disciplines and campuses.

The guiding ethic of national service was unyielding in Fiji. Participants often described FNU as "the people's university," emphasising its obligations to rural and maritime communities, working adults, and those pursuing vocational or technical pathways. This narrative placed FNU not only within the National Development Plan but also within a more profound cultural philosophy that carries obligations to *vanua*, kinship networks, and the wider community. Participants framed their work as a form of service that extends beyond professional identity, a responsibility shaped by both Indigenous values and national expectations.

The aspirations to embed *iTaukei* knowledge across the curriculum remain constrained by structural and colonial legacies, as well as the persistent pull of Euro-Western frameworks in curriculum development, assessment systems, and professional standards. This created a tension between what educators wished to foreground (e.g. local ecological knowledge,

vernacular traditions, relational ethics) and what national evaluation systems demand. Fiji's linguistic landscape complicates matters further. English remains the language of academic authority, despite the cultural richness of *iTaukei* and Indo-Fijian knowledge traditions that participants were eager to see recognised.

Fiji's national story is ultimately one of negotiation. FNU is pursuing a distinctive path, grounded in inclusion, culture, and applied research, yet operating within a political and educational ecosystem where national, regional and global pressures constantly intersect. The case highlights that national universities are living organisms, shaped simultaneously by state priorities, cultural expectations, and inherited structures. For Fiji, the national project is as much about institutional consolidation and pedagogical renewal as it is about reclaiming epistemic space within a system long shaped by external norms.

National Priorities: Summary

In this study, national universities emerge as potential sites of transformation. Participants called for leadership that is relational, reflexive, and grounded in collective accountability, community engagement and national service. Their voices advocate a decolonial re-imagining of higher education, one that prioritises relational partnerships over transactional arrangements, restores Indigenous knowledge within curricula, and insists that policy and planning reflect both local epistemologies and global realities. Across Melanesian contexts, for example, politicised dynamics related to language diversity intersected more strongly with epistemic autonomy than in Polynesian contexts. Effective governance in the region, the findings suggest, requires moving beyond leadership models imported from elsewhere towards Indigenous leadership, a more relational governance approach. This contextually responsive approach grounds decision-making in reciprocity, transparency, and service. Examples of this within the case studies point to emerging shifts in which the embedding of local languages and cultural principles within university priority-setting signals a quiet but powerful reassertion of epistemic sovereignty.

Ultimately, to centre national priorities is to recognise that leadership knowledge and identity are not discrete entities, but interwoven responsibilities. The national university becomes both a guardian of heritage and a space of renewal, where Indigenous philosophies of collective well-being redefine what it means to know, to serve, and to lead. The following section extends this discussion to the regional scale, tracing how solidarity and disconnection shape the shared horizon of higher education across Moana Oceania.

Regionalism: Between Solidarity and Disconnection

Regionalism in Moana Oceania is often imagined as a unifying current, a means of pooling limited resources, harmonising systems, and expressing shared identities (PIFS, 2014). From the establishment of the University of the South Pacific (USP) in 1968, to the creation of regional mechanisms such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), and multilateral frameworks, including the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF), EQAP, and the Blue Pacific Strategy, regional cooperation has long carried both pragmatic and philosophical weight. It has enabled collective representation on the world stage, enhanced mobility of students and knowledge, and strengthened policy dialogue across diverse national contexts. However, this same regionalism also reveals fault lines. The uneven distribution of power and resources, and the recurrent tension between collective solidarity and national specificity.

Participants across all five national university contexts described regional cooperation as a double-edged phenomenon. On one hand, they acknowledged the benefits of shared learning, benchmarking, and regional standards as mechanisms for collective strength. On the other hand, they expressed frustrations with regional initiatives perceived as disconnected from the lived realities of their national contexts. Many viewed regional projects as externally driven, shaped by donor priorities or external expertise, rather than grounded in local epistemologies or Indigenous leadership. The sense of *wansolwara*, the shared oceanic kinship that connects the peoples of Moana Oceania, was thus sometimes overshadowed by bureaucratic processes that reproduced hierarchies of influence and voice. This ambivalence underscores the dual nature of regionalism, both as a manifestation of cultural kinship and a site of structural asymmetry.

Samoa

Regionalism for Samoa is both a space of solidarity and a site of subtle disconnection. Participants expressed strong cultural affiliation to Moana Oceania, drawing on shared histories, linguistic affinities, and regional values. They also described the practical dimensions of regional cooperation as uneven, often shaped by the dominance of larger institutions or donor expectations.

Samoa's relationship with USP captures some of this tension. While USP provides access to regional expertise and shared standards, regional initiatives can feel distant from the lived realities of national institutions, according to some participants. Frameworks such as PacREF,

while helping align regional aspirations, sometimes reproduce a top-down logic that does not fully accommodate Samoa's specific contexts or its commitment to *fa'a Samoa* as a guiding principle. However, at the time of this research, PacREF was only in Phase 1 of implementation, so significant work remains to contextualise it at a national level.

Nonetheless, capacity imbalances remain. Smaller institutions like NUS often view regional projects as extractive, characterised by external timelines, limited local consultation, and expectations of alignment without genuine reciprocity. Participants repeatedly emphasised that meaningful regional engagement requires attention to voice, agency, and contextual equity, rather than mere harmonisation.

In Samoa's case, regionalism has the potential to support local priorities when approached as co-navigation rather than convergence. The challenge is to ensure that regional spaces recognise NUS not as a peripheral beneficiary but as an equal contributor, with its own knowledge, traditions and leadership capacities. In this sense, Samoa exemplifies the broader finding that regional cooperation becomes transformative only when anchored in relational ethics and respect for epistemic diversity.

Tonga

For Tonga, regionalism is a familiar and long-standing terrain, shaped by historical participation in the University of the South Pacific and by contemporary commitments such as PacREF and the PQF. Participants described regionalism as simultaneously a space of solidarity and a site of structural imbalance. Tonga's cultural ethic of reciprocity aligns naturally with regional cooperation, but the practical experience of regional initiatives often reflected asymmetry, standardisation pressures, and limited contextual fit.

USP exemplifies this duality. Participants acknowledged its role in providing regional academic pathways, technical leadership, and a quality benchmark. However, USP was also seen as a competitor for students, funding, and national recognition, a tension sharpened by the establishment of TNU. While USP's presence in Tonga provides opportunities, it also risks overshadowing TNU's development, particularly when regional standards or models are adopted without space for TNU's emergent institutional identity.

Regional quality assurance frameworks, including TNQAB's alignment to the PQF, were experienced as both enabling and constraining. While alignment supports mobility and recognisability of Tongan qualifications, it can also pull national institutions toward regional templates that may not fully accommodate Tongan cultural imperatives or institutional realities.

Participants emphasised caution so that regional alignment does not inadvertently re-centre external epistemic norms at the expense of local priorities.

Across participant *talanoa*, the strongest theme to emerge was the importance of relational regionalism. Participants valued regional engagement when it honoured Tonga's sovereignty, recognised TNU's contextual realities, and was built on mutual respect rather than bureaucratic uniformity. In this sense, Tongan perspectives echo the broader finding in the Discussion chapter; that regionalism becomes meaningful when acted as a space of shared currents, reciprocal care, and respect for the *mana* in each nation.

The Tonga case illustrates that regionalism remains essential, but it must be navigated through cultural ethics rather than through narrow managerial approaches. If regionalism is to support TNU's growth, it must create space for Tonga's voice, values, and contributions, recognising that epistemic diversity strengthens the region, rather than weakens it.

Solomon Islands

Regionalism in the Solomon Islands case study emerged as a site of ambivalence, where the promises of solidarity coexist with frustrations over disconnect and irrelevance. Participants recognised the cultural value of *wansolwara*, the sense of shared current across Moana Oceania, and affirmed the potential of regional cooperation when grounded in reciprocity and contextual equity. This ideal sat uneasily alongside lived experiences of regional institutions that appeared distant from national realities. For example, participants argued that USP has failed to adapt to the rise of national universities and continues to operate as if regional contexts are interchangeable. Several observed that curricula rarely reflect the cultural, linguistic, or social specificities of the Solomon Islands, reinforcing the perception that USP remains tethered to outdated regional education practices. The establishment of a new USP campus in Honiara was acknowledged, but some questioned whether physical expansion alone could resolve deeper issues of relevance and responsiveness.

Regional frameworks, including PacREF and the PQF, generated similar ambivalence. Participants recognised their value in supporting shared standards and mobility, yet they expressed concern that such frameworks can unintentionally impose a homogenising logic. When regional templates are applied without local flexibility, they risk reproducing external priorities and muting Indigenous epistemologies.

Tok stori surfaced as a way to reclaim regionalism on cultural terms. Participants framed it as a dialogic space for negotiating shared problems while honouring place-based knowledge, describing it as a "middle ground" that can bridge regional aspirations and national realities.

Regionalism, therefore, becomes most meaningful not through bureaucratic alignment alone, but through relational solidarity grounded in *wansolwara*, a commitment to navigate together while respecting national contexts. The Solomon Islands case reinforces the broader argument that regional cooperation holds transformative potential when approached through cultural kinship rather than standardisation. For SINU, the challenge is ensuring that engagement with regional frameworks strengthens its national identity and Indigenous foundations.

Vanuatu

Vanuatu's relationship with regionalism reflects the distinctive position of a Melanesian nation deeply invested in collective solidarity, but determined to chart a path that foregrounds national sovereignty and cultural specificity. Participants acknowledged the historical and ongoing role of regional institutions during the early stages of PSET system-building. In the absence of a mature national university, these regional mechanisms offer scaffolding, but as NUV develops, the dynamics of these relationships are shifting. Several participants described the transition away from USP's dominant influence as uneven and at times challenging. Resources, staffing arrangements, and programme responsibilities did not neatly follow the political discussions to establish a national university. This left NUV in a liminal space expected to take on national responsibilities, but without the inherited infrastructure that larger, older Moana Oceania national universities once had. Through this lens, regional frameworks occasionally appeared to overshadow rather than complement national development.

The inaugural 2024 MSG Vice Chancellor's meeting was framed as a turning point. Participants saw this gathering as an assertion of shared Melanesian identity, a reminder that cultural and linguistic kinship can shape new forms of regional cooperation. The emphasis on Indigenous languages, cultural resilience, and joint research into peace, security, and climate adaptation reflected a move away from regionalism built on standardisation and towards one grounded in solidarity and shared historical experiences (MSG, 2024a, 2024b).

Participants described tensions between regional alignment and national identity. Frameworks and programmes designed for regional comparability sometimes clash with the lived realities of Vanuatu's linguistic plurality, *kastom*-based governance, and varied educational needs across rural and outer-island communities. While mobility and mutual recognition are valued, they risk flattening cultural nuances when regional templates are applied too rigidly.

Despite these tensions, the ethic of *wansolwara* remains strong. Participants articulated a desire for a region that collaborates not out of administrative necessity, but through cultural kinship and shared responsibility. With NUV's establishment, Vanuatu is repositioning itself within

that regional space, no longer primarily a recipient of regional provision, but an emerging contributor. The case demonstrates that regionalism remains vital, but its forms must evolve to respect national distinctiveness and place Indigenous knowledge at the heart of regional collaboration.

Fiji

Fiji occupies a singular position in the regional higher education landscape, hosting the region's flagship university (USP), while building its own national university in parallel. Participants acknowledged the significance of this arrangement, describing it as beneficial, complex, and occasionally contentious. For many, USP remains a critical anchor of Pacific regionalism, culturally meaningful and diplomatically important. Participants' narratives also made clear that Fiji's national priorities have, at times, felt marginal within regional decision-making.

Competition between FNU and USP surfaced repeatedly in *talanoa*. While some participants viewed the two institutions as complementary, with USP serving the region and FNU serving Fiji, others perceived tension over programme duplication, qualification recognition, and resources. The sense that Fijian interests were sometimes diluted within regional fora contributed to the political decision to strengthen FNU as a national counterbalance. This dynamic reflects broader themes in Moana Oceania about the balance between regional solidarity and national sovereignty.

Regional qualification frameworks and harmonisation efforts were described as double-edged. Participants acknowledged the benefits of mutual recognition and standardisation across Moana Oceania. However, they raised concerns that these frameworks could curtail local adaptability and inadvertently reinforce the dominant role of larger institutions. The Fiji case shows that regionalism must be carefully mediated so that it supports national universities without restricting their autonomy or reproducing centralised norms.

Regionalism was not narrated solely as competition. Participants also highlighted the value of shared resilience in moments of crisis, an experience brought sharply into focus following cyclones and the pandemic. Training delivered through regional partnerships contributed to local capacity in disaster response, health, and community leadership. Regionalism was experienced here as *wansolwara*, grounded in shared challenges and collective responsibility. The Fiji case demonstrates that regionalism is not a static or singular force, but a relational terrain, shaped by solidarity, competition, practical interdependence, and cultural kinship. As FNU deepens its leadership through PIURN, MSG, and regional research networks, the country is repositioning itself not only as a host to USP but as a regional contributor in its own right.

The Fiji narratives emphasised that regionalism thrives when institutions collaborate through respect and reciprocity, recognising that diversity among Moana Oceania nations strengthens rather than weakens the collective.

Regionalism: Summary

Within this complexity, *motutapu* and *wansolwara* offer a way of reimagining historical regionalism, not as a political or administrative construct, but as a relational ethic. *Motutapu* grounds cooperation in respect for place and sovereignty, insisting that the *mana* of each national university must be recognised. *Wansolwara* complements this by emphasising interconnectedness, that no island nation stands alone, and that learning, like the tides, is in perpetual motion. When taken together, these frameworks point towards a regionalism of relational solidarity. A solidarity premised on dialogue, reciprocity, and contextual equity, rather than standardisation and centralisation.

In this light, the future of regional collaboration in higher education depends on reframing the purpose of cooperation. Rather than prescribing uniform models or policy templates, regionalism can become a space for co-navigation, a process through which institutions share resources and strategies while maintaining their own epistemic sovereignty. Such an approach aligns with the broader decolonial agenda of Moana Oceania, transforming regionalism from a mechanism of alignment into a practice of mutual care. It recognises that the strength of the region lies not in sameness, but in the dynamic balance between rootedness and relation, between the *motu* (island) and the *moana* (ocean) that binds them.

Internationalisation: Entanglements, Dominance & Repositioning

If regionalism is an ocean of shared kinship, then internationalisation can be seen as the broader horizon, where national universities of Moana Oceania meet the shifting tides of global power, economy, and interfacing knowledge systems. Across all five case studies, internationalisation emerged as both an opportunity and a vulnerability, a pathway for collaboration and visibility, and, unfortunately, a conduit through which inequities and hierarchies are reproduced. Donor influences, transnational education agreements, and global ranking systems often introduced external expectations that privileged Global North epistemologies and performance logics. The language of ‘capacity building’, ‘quality assurance’, and ‘global competitiveness’, though well-intentioned, frequently obscured the asymmetrical relationships that underpinned them. For

many participants, international partnerships risked becoming extractive, spaces where knowledge, data, and legitimacy flowed outward, while recognition and institutional agency remained constrained.

Within these entanglements lie possibilities for transformation (Takayama et al., 2017). The case studies reveal a growing movement among national universities toward strategic, purposeful international engagement and partnerships that amplify Indigenous scholarship rather than conform to external benchmarks. In several contexts, participants described efforts to co-author research grounded in local epistemologies, to host visiting scholars who come to learn rather than teach, and to design exchange programmes that prioritise cultural immersion and reciprocity. These practices mark a shift from transactional models of collaboration toward what might be called relational internationalisation, an approach guided by respect, mutual learning, and ethical interdependence.

Samoa

Internationalisation surfaced in Samoa as a complex and often fraught area, characterised by both opportunity and partnership asymmetry. Participants value international connections for their potential to broaden academic horizons, expand research collaboration, and increase mobility. They were equally wary of partnerships structured by donors, hierarchical epistemologies, and assumptions that external expertise should lead local development.

Several participants described international partnerships as predominantly transactional, defined by project deliverables, donor priorities, or the narrow interests of external institutions. These relationships often reinforced existing inequalities, particularly in access to funding, authorship, and agenda-setting. The challenge of brain drain further complicated the picture, with high-achieving Samoans frequently recruited or choosing to remain overseas for work (e.g., through labour mobility schemes) or through academic scholarships, thereby exacerbating the country's persistent human resources capacity gap.

Central to Samoa's critique of internationalisation is the ethics of relationality (*vā*). Participants consistently emphasised that collaborations should honour Samoan cultural principles, such as reciprocity, respect, accountability, and genuine relationship-building. When these principles are neglected, partnerships risk becoming extractive, with knowledge and data flowing outward while authority and recognition remain elsewhere.

The Samoan case also demonstrates that internationalisation can be reimagined. Leaders and staff described efforts to cultivate partnerships that value Samoan knowledge, position NUS as

an equal intellectual partner, and create opportunities for outward cultural learning rather than one-way transfer. Examples included: co-created research grounded in Samoan epistemologies, culturally-informed exchange programmes, and international visibility for scholarship rooted in Samoan intellectual traditions.

In the Samoan context, the aspiration is not to reject international engagement, but to reshape it, moving from acceptance to co-creation, from dependency to agency, and from externally defined benchmarks to frameworks that respect Samoan priorities. When internationalisation is approached as shared stewardship rather than competition or extraction, it holds potential to strengthen both local capacity and global recognition of Indigenous knowledge. Samoa's experience underscores that international partnerships must be relational in design and ethical in practice if they are to contribute meaningfully to national development and epistemic sovereignty.

Tonga

Internationalisation in the Tongan context is marked by profound asymmetry. Participants described international engagement as indispensable for accessing funding, training, and specialist expertise, but also as a site where global development agendas, donor conditionalities, and external norms exert disproportionate influence. The relationship with international partners was often experienced as structurally unequal, framed more by compliance than by co-creation.

The dominance of donor-funded initiatives, particularly from Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and the World Bank, shapes the strategic landscape of TNU. Participants recognised the practical benefits of such support, particularly for infrastructure improvements, curriculum projects, and expanded scholarship opportunities. They also raised concerns that external agendas can redirect attention away from Tonga's own priorities, particularly when partnership activities are tied to rigid frameworks or narrow indicators of success.

Scholarships emerged as a particularly ambivalent mechanism. While they offer transformative opportunities for individual Tongans, they also reproduce patterns of dependency, shape academic aspirations toward externally valued fields, and contribute to an enduring cycle of outward migration. For participants, this dynamic reinforced the challenge of building sustainable national capacity when the most qualified graduates often study and work abroad. Internationalisation also intersects deeply with Tonga's epistemic position. Limited access to academic journals, research funding, and global knowledge networks hampers TNU staff's ability to participate fully in international scholarship. Participants framed this not simply as a

resource issue, but as a matter of equity. Tonga's intellectual capacities are constrained by structural barriers that reflect unequal global relations.

The Tongan case also points to possibilities for reimagining international engagement. Participants described attempts to negotiate more relational partnerships, grounded in *tauhi vā*, in which external experts work alongside local staff rather than 'above' them, and in which Tongan values and priorities shape collaborative projects. The transformation of internationalisation requires moving beyond project-based transactions towards partnerships that honour Indigenous knowledge systems, respect local leadership, and nurture reciprocal learning.

Tonga's experiences show that internationalisation need not undermine national sovereignty. It can support it, provided that relationships are rooted in cultural ethics, rather than donor priorities. As with regionalism, the future lies in cultivating partnerships that recognise the *mana* of place, foreground relational accountability, and position TNU as a contributor to a broader intellectual ocean.

Solomon Islands

Internationalisation in the Solomon Islands is a profoundly meaningful and entangled space, where opportunity and dependency sit side by side. Participants spoke of perceived hierarchies in overseas education, where international scholarships confer prestige, shape social status, and pull high-achieving students away from local institutions. This dynamic reinforces that SINU is a 'second choice' pathway, despite its central role in national development. Such hierarchies were not trivial social preferences, but reflections of uneven global power, the power that knowledge produced elsewhere is inherently superior.

Donor dependency intensified these imbalances. Participants described planning processes that often began not with national priorities, but with the parameters of donor funds or SDG indicators. While acknowledging the importance of those indicators and the material benefits of partnerships, they raised concerns about how donor expectations shape curricula, governance, and the direction of the higher education system. The pressure to adopt 'best practice' models was seen as an ongoing threat to autonomy and the embedding of Indigenous values within institutional life.

Participants envisioned a different kind of internationalisation. They articulated a desire for genuinely relational partnerships that honour Indigenous epistemologies and position the Solomon Islands as a contributor, rather than a passive recipient. *Tok stori* was offered as a relational practice capable of transforming international collaboration through dialogue,

respect, and cultural immersion, challenging transactional models and creating spaces for co-creation.

Some participants also recognise the potential for internationalisation to elevate Solomon Islands knowledge globally. For example, attracting international students to learn about Solomon Islands' languages, ecological practices and climate resilience strategies. International engagement then becomes a platform for asserting epistemic sovereignty rather than for mimicking external norms.

The Solomon Islands' case demonstrates that internationalisation is not inherently damaging to national autonomy. Instead, its impact depends on the ethics that guide it. When approached through *wansolwara* and grounded in land, genealogy, relational accountability, and a recognition of interconnectedness without subordination, internationalisation can become a site for possibilities. It offers a pathway for mutual learning, shared stewardship, and global recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems.

Vanuatu

A delicate balance between necessity and autonomy marks internationalisation in Vanuatu. Participants spoke about international engagements in terms of the resources, expertise, and legitimacy they provide, but also about how they dilute national priorities and compromise cultural grounding. Donor relationships with Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, France and ADB, for example, have been central to developing the PSET infrastructure, strengthening regulatory bodies, and funding scholarships. While the support is appreciated, participants note that without it, NUV and other PSET providers would struggle to deliver their programmes. They expressed concerns that donor frameworks often arrive with underlying assumptions about quality, leadership, and institutional development that do not always align with *kastom*, multilingualism, or the strategic priorities articulated in the People's Plan.

The pressure from international benchmarks and expectations (e.g., English-language dominance, global notions of academic excellence, publishing and research outputs, etc.) was described as particularly fraught. Participants worried that these metrics risk marginalising Indigenous epistemologies, constraining bilingual development, and privileging imported models of governance and curriculum design. The tension was profound, with NUV aspiring to be recognised internationally while avoiding the structural traps that replicate epistemic inequities.

The Vanuatu case demonstrates a more deliberate, relational vision of internationalisation. Participants described strategic partnerships that align with Vanuatu's bilingual identity, such

as collaborations with French universities, as well as relationships with institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Malaysia. These partnerships were valued for creating space for joint curriculum design, dual degrees, research rooted in local priorities, and recognition of Vanuatu's cultural and linguistic uniqueness.

Participants also imagined an internationalisation that amplifies rather than erodes Indigenous knowledge, positioning NUV as a hub for Pacific climate resilience, traditional ecological knowledge, and cultural sustainability. The potential to develop international programmes centred on *kastom*, linguistic diversity and community-based resilience was seen as a transformative, internationalisation opportunity.

Internationalisation, in the Vanuatu case study, is neither rejected nor embraced uncritically. Instead, it is reworked through *storian*, relational ethics, and *kastom* responsibilities. The task for NUV is to maintain this grounding while navigating the global currents that inevitably shape the future of Moana Oceania national universities. The Vanuatu case demonstrates that international partnerships can coexist with national sovereignty, but only where the terms of engagement are guided by Indigenous values, linguistic plurality, and the commitments articulated in the People's Plan.

Fiji

Internationalisation in Fiji is simultaneously an aspiration, opportunity, and structural tension. Participants articulated the value of global partnerships, research collaborations, staff mobility, recognition of qualifications, and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. However, they also recognised the risks of uncritically adopting international benchmarks that do not reflect Fiji's social and cultural realities.

A recurrent theme was the desire for global recognition of FNU degrees, especially beyond Moana Oceania. Participants spoke of the necessity of international credibility, given the mobility of Fijian graduates and the competitive nature of global labour markets. Additionally, there was equal concern that pursuing global rankings or external validation could lead the institution away from its national mission. The question was not whether to engage globally, but how to do so without becoming beholden to external norms and pressures. This approach to internationalisation re-centres relational accountability, rather than metrics-driven performance.

Leadership surfaced as a key site of internationalisation, particularly with the appointment of the first female *iTaukei* Vice-Chancellor. Participants viewed this moment as emblematic of a

broader shift towards decolonial institutional practices, a leadership style informed by Fijian cultural values, yet critically reflective of them.

At the same time, global benchmarks (e.g. research output indices, accreditation standards, ranking methodologies) exert a powerful influence. Participants described these pressures as unavoidable, but potentially distortive. They risk shifting attention away from national priorities, such as rural access, vocational relevance, and culturally grounded curriculum design. Internationalisation thus becomes a balancing act between striving for global validity while refusing to compromise national commitments.

Participants also spoke of selective internationalisation whereby they cultivate partnerships that reinforce Fiji's resilience and national interests, particularly in climate adaptation, renewable energy, marine science, and health. These areas position Fiji as a knowledge generator. FNU's international engagement is not a pathway toward assimilation into global norms, but a space to contribute Moana Oceania expertise to shared global challenges.

The Fiji case makes clear that internationalisation is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently harmful. Its value depends on relational ethics, cultural grounding, and the capacity of national institutions to determine the terms of engagement. When international partnerships align with *vanua* values, national priorities, and Moana Oceania solidarities, they expand rather than constrain the possibilities of higher education. Fiji's experience offers a compelling example of how national universities can navigate global currents without losing their anchor in local identity.

Internationalisation: Summary

Framed through *motutapu* and *wansolwara*, internationalisation becomes not a project of expansion, but an act of navigation. *Motutapu* reminds institutions to remain anchored in their own genealogies of knowledge, to engage outwardly without surrendering the *mana* of place. *Wansolwara* embodies the currents that connect Moana Oceania to the world, suggesting that global engagement need not mean assimilation, but rather participation in a broader conversation on equal terms. Within this relational paradigm, partnerships can be reimagined through knowledge diplomacy, a process of dialogue that values Indigenous epistemologies as globally relevant and intellectually generative.

The challenge then is to transform internationalisation from a transnational economy of exchange into a practice of shared stewardship. For Moana Oceania's national universities, this

means asserting their role not as recipients of knowledge, but as contributors to global thought, navigators charting their own courses across shifting seas.

Recentring Indigenous Knowledge & Epistemic Sovereignty

As the discussion of internationalisation demonstrates, global engagement can either reinforce epistemic hierarchies or open spaces for more relational and equitable forms of knowledge diplomacy rather than extractive forms of internationalisation. This tension leads directly to the deeper question of whose knowledge counts, and on what terms, within national universities of Moana Oceania. Across all case studies, participants emphasised that meaningful transformation requires more than resisting existing influences or redesigning partnerships. It demands a fundamental recentring of Indigenous epistemologies as the foundation of knowledge production, institutional identity, and academic practice.

Central to this research is the conviction that knowledge in Moana Oceania must be navigated through frameworks and methodologies, such as *motutapu*, *wansolwara*, *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian*. These approaches are not simply methods of inquiry; they are ontological commitments that shape how truth, ethics, and relationality are understood. They recognise that knowledge is inseparable from land, language, genealogy, and responsibility. Through collaborative sensemaking, participants reframed research as an act of relational accountability rather than extraction. This approach stands in direct contrast to the extractive academic traditions embedded in many Euro-Western research paradigms.

This movement towards epistemic sovereignty is already visible within national universities, particularly in their efforts to reclaim, valorise, and institutionalise Indigenous knowledge within institutional cultures, curricula, and research agendas. These efforts challenge the long-standing privileging of imported knowledge systems, inherited frameworks, disciplines, and pedagogies that dominate higher education by asserting the legitimacy, sophistication, and global relevance of Indigenous intellectual traditions. In doing so, they expand the possibilities of what scholarship in Moana Oceania can be and who it can serve.

Recentring Indigenous knowledge is thus both a methodological and political act. It disrupts inherited hierarchies, unsettles the dominance of external benchmarks, and restores agency to communities who have long been positioned at the margins of academic authority. It also requires epistemological humility, a recognition that knowledge is co-constructed through

relationship and responsibility, and that scholarship must be accountable to the communities and contexts from which it emerges.

The following section turns inward to reflect on how these dynamics of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance also shaped my own positionalities and the ethical commitments that underpin this study, offering a reflexive account of navigating research within and alongside Indigenous Moana Oceania.

Implications for Policy Transfer and Policy Translation

These findings also speak to wider debates in policy transfer theory. They suggest that higher education policy movements in Moana Oceania cannot be adequately understood through a simple borrowing model where ideas, frameworks, or institutional forms move from one context to another and are then implemented. The case studies show that policy movements are mediated through negotiation, adaptation, resistance, and translation within historically and politically uneven contexts. Regional frameworks, donor agendas, and global higher education norms do not arrive in neutral forms. They are carried through relationships of power and legitimacy that can position external models as authoritative even when their assumptions do not align with national priorities, Indigenous knowledge systems, or local institutional realities.

From this perspective, the thesis supports a shift from thinking in terms of policy borrowing alone towards a more critical account of policy translation. National universities in Moana Oceania are not passive recipients of external policy ideas, nor are they wholly free actors operating outside structural constraints. Instead, they work within complex conditions of donor dependency, geopolitical influences, regional expectations, and national responsibilities, interpreting and reworking policy ideas in ways that are pragmatic, relational, and context-responsive. This helps extend critiques of uncritical policy transfer (Crossley, 2019) by showing that what may appear as compliance or adoption from the outside may, in practice, involve careful negotiation over relevance, legitimacy, and institutional purpose. The findings, therefore, contribute to policy transfer scholarship by foregrounding how translation could be shaped by colonial histories, epistemic hierarchies, and Indigenous claims to educational meaning and authority.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionalities

The interpretive process of this research journey also required continual reflexivity regarding my positionalities and the relational ethics of knowledge production. As a non-Indigenous researcher working within and alongside Indigenous spaces, collaborative sensemaking demanded ongoing negotiation of identity, privilege, and accountability. This was not a static self-disclosure, but a dynamic process of learning, unlearning, and being taught by the contexts. Relational methodologies transformed both the research process and me as the researcher, further emphasising that cross-cultural engagement in Moana Oceania must be approached as a continual nurturing of the relational spaces. The work of humility, listening, and co-creation was as critical to ethical validity as the data itself.

At the core is relationality, a principle shared across Moana Oceania and foundational to all personal, professional and spiritual interactions. Relationality is not only the beginning point of research, but the ocean that sustains it, an environment that must be created, tended, and continually renewed. Through activating relationality within the research spaces in Samoa, Tonga, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji, I came to understand its formative role not only in sensemaking but also in the organisational lives of national universities. Relationality shapes the ways decisions are made, knowledge is valued, and futures are imagined. It also revealed the ethical potency of Indigenous methodologies, that knowledge generation can be both rigorous and relational, critical and compassionate.

This research was intentionally designed to confront and critique dominant paradigms of the global academic economy and Euro-Western dominance. It is a political act itself, as Patel (2015) reminds us, “Settler-colonial institutions structurally developed with the intention to have learners achieve a settler/colonial worldview and knowledge base through often unfamiliar methods of knowledge transfer and mobility” (p. xiii). To work within such institutions is therefore to navigate a paradox, to seek transformation within structures that were never designed for epistemic equity. Every methodological choice, every interaction with participants, and every act of interpretation carried implications and impact. Recognising this, I centred each step of the process to reflect *motutapu*, grounding the research in place, context and accountability, while remaining open to the *wansolwara* currents of dialogue and shared discovery.

Ultimately, this reflexive stance reframed the researcher's role as a participant in the broader constellation of relationships. The research aimed not to speak for, but to listen with; not to define, but to walk alongside. In doing so, it modelled how diverse worldviews might move together on a path of mutual learning and respect. Reflexivity thus becomes more than a methodological safeguard. It is an ethical stance and a continual practice of returning to the shore, re-examining one's bearings, and acknowledging the relational obligations that make knowledge possible.

Discussion Summary

This chapter has examined how national universities of Moana Oceania navigate the interwoven scales of national, regional and global influences. Across the five case studies, national universities emerge as sites of negotiation, spaces where Indigenous values, national aspirations, and external expectations intersect. From the centring of national priorities and institutional identity to the pursuit of regional solidarity and the navigation of international partnerships, the findings reveal that higher education in the region is neither peripheral nor passive. Instead, it is dynamic, relational, and politically charged, reflecting an ongoing struggle to define what a university is for, and for whom, within the currents of decolonisation and globalisation.

The discussion foregrounded three key insights. First, that national universities function as moral and cultural institutions as much as educational ones, embodying Indigenous epistemologies and leadership ethics that prioritise collective well-being. Second, regionalism remains both an anchor and a tide. It can unify through shared purpose, yet fragment when detached from national contexts. Third, that internationalisation can be re-imagined into a form of knowledge diplomacy grounded in reciprocity and relationality. Together, these findings suggest that the most meaningful forms of reform in the national universities of Moana Oceania will arise not from imported models, but from within, through approaches that honour contexts, languages, and the deep relational logics that bind peoples and places.

The research, therefore, concludes by emphasising the importance of reframing higher education as a relational institution. An institution that sustains culture, fosters resilience, and advances epistemic sovereignty. Persistent challenges remain (e.g. inequitable access, donor dependency, and the enduring shadows of colonial legacies). Within these challenges also lie opportunities for transformation. Leveraging practices such as *tok stori*, *talanoa*, and *storian*, reframing internationalisation through ethical partnerships, and strengthening regional

solidarity can all contribute to more grounded and just higher education systems across the region.

In the spirit of *motutapu* and *wansolwara*, the chapter has woven a narrative of interconnectedness and accountability. Moana Oceania's national universities inhabit the tension between rootedness and movement, between land and ocean, and between the inherited and the emergent. They exemplify how relational worldviews can resist epistemic homogenisation and instead foster pluralism, reciprocity, and collective flourishing. This sense-making journey thus prepares the ground for Chapter 10, which distils the study's principal conclusions, implications and future directions, returning to the central question of how higher education in Moana Oceania might continue to navigate towards knowledge sovereignty and relational futures.

Chapter 10. Conclusions

Re-centring the Research Purpose

The Indigenous peoples of Moana Oceania have been exchanging knowledge for millennia. The values of relationality, reciprocity and negotiation are evident in both their long histories and contemporary realities. Contemporary higher education, however, has been primarily led by a neoliberal, racialised orientation where knowledge and people are traded as commodities. This thesis set out to understand how national universities in Moana Oceania navigate the complex and intersecting terrain of national priorities, regional frameworks, and global expectations. At the heart was a concern for relevance, equity and epistemic sovereignty. In other words, how institutions grounded in Indigenous values chart their path through systems and structures shaped by colonial legacies, donor influences, and neoliberal forms of internationalisation. Across the five national contexts of Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji, the study explored how national universities negotiate these pressures while remaining accountable to the cultural, linguistic, and genealogical foundations that give their work meaning and shape their institutional identity.

The research also emerged from the recognition that higher education in Moana Oceania is shaped not simply by policy or economic forces, but by relational philosophies that have sustained knowledge-making and knowledge transfer. Practices such as *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian*, alongside the guiding concepts of *motutapu* and *wansolwara*, provided the ontological and methodological grounding for the inquiry. These frameworks foreground the responsibilities inherent in relationships, between people, place and knowledge; between national needs and regional solidarities; and between Indigenous epistemologies and global academic norms.

This concluding chapter revisits the research aims and questions, summarising the intellectual and relational voyages undertaken, and drawing together insights from across the case studies through the collaborative sensemaking process. It synthesises how national universities navigate the interplay of national, regional, and international forces, and considers what this reveals about the future of higher education in the region. In doing so, the chapter positions the research findings within broader debates on decolonisation, internationalisation and the reclamation of Indigenous intellectual authority. It also offers a conceptual contribution, the

Relational University, which seeks to articulate how higher education can be understood and re-imagined through philosophical and ethical commitments to Moana Oceania.

Negotiating Priorities: A Synthesis Across the Five Case Studies

Across the five case studies, national universities in Moana Oceania confront a shared set of pressures while drawing on distinct cultural, political and institutional resources to navigate them. Although each country's history, governance structures and educational systems differ, the analysis reveals consistent patterns in how universities reconcile national commitments, regional obligations and global expectations. Rather than adopting external models wholesale, institutions engage in continuous, relational negotiation shaped by Indigenous values, contextual realities and the pursuit of relevance for their communities.

A first point of convergence lies in the primacy of national priorities. In all five contexts, universities positioned themselves as institutions with a responsibility to serve the nation, to strengthen workforce capacity, protect cultural and linguistic heritage, and address development challenges exacerbated by demographic pressures and environmental vulnerabilities. This commitment to national service was articulated differently in each case. Through the ethics of *fa'a Samoa*, *anga fankatonga* ("to lead is to serve"), *tautua*, *kastom* authority, *vanua*, and communal obligation, to name a few, the underlying imperative was shared. Universities seek to ground their academic and organisational decisions in the needs of their people, even when constrained by limited resources or competing political demands.

Regionalism presented a more ambivalent terrain. Institutions recognised the value of regional cooperation, particularly through shared frameworks, quality assurance mechanisms and the symbolic solidarity of *wansolwara*. Regional collaboration offered access to expertise and a collective voice, especially in negotiations with large international actors. Regionalism also produces tensions, as several universities share, through regional structures dominated by larger or more established institutions and lacking responsiveness to national needs. Concerns surfaced about uneven resource flows, competition for students, and the risk that regional policies might inadvertently marginalise local priorities. The case studies illustrate that regionalism is most effective when pursued through reciprocal, transparent partnerships rather than hierarchical arrangements that echo earlier forms of academic centralisation.

Internationalisation was approached with both caution and strategic intent. Universities sought recognition, mobility and external support, but they did so selectively, prioritising partnerships

that respected Indigenous knowledge systems and allowed for institutional autonomy. Participants across the case studies voiced concerns about donor-driven agendas, the pressures of global benchmarking, and the tendency for international partners to privilege their own epistemologies, research agendas and strategic priorities. They also highlighted opportunities for genuinely collaborative engagement, remarkably when relationships were grounded in respect, mutual learning, and cultural humility. The study shows that internationalisation in Moana Oceania is not rejected; instead, it is redefined through Indigenous ethics of relationality, where partnerships are valued only when they contribute to collective benefits rather than extractive gains.

Taken together, the five case studies reveal universities that are not passive recipients of global forces but active navigators of a complex educational seascape. Their strategies reflect neither resistance nor compliance, but an ongoing process of balancing cultural continuity and institutional development, local responsibilities and global participation, and the draw to external resources with the preservation of knowledge sovereignty. This synthesis highlights that the work of national universities in Moana Oceania is fundamentally relational, shaped by obligations to people, land and history. It is within this relational orientation that their distinct contributions to higher education, locally, regionally, and globally, must be understood.

Re-envisioning Internationalisation and Knowledge Diplomacy

Across the five case studies, internationalisation emerged as both an aspiration and a site of profound tension. While universities recognised the value of global engagement for collaborative research, academic mobility, or the strengthening of recognition of qualifications, participants consistently emphasised that inherited models of internationalisation failed to account for the cultural, epistemic, and relational foundations of higher education in Moana Oceania. The dominant approaches, shaped by colonial legacies, metrics-driven logics, and the epistemic authority of Global North institutions, were frequently experienced as extractive, asymmetrical and inattentive to local priorities.

The research illustrates that internationalisation, as conventionally practised, often amplifies existing inequities and asymmetries. Partnerships framed around technical assistance, capacity building, or donor-defined outcomes can inadvertently position national universities as peripheral rather than intellectual partners or leaders within their own contexts. Several participants described a sense of being “acted upon” by international partners, particularly when

agenda-setting occurred outside the region or when collaboration was tied to political or economic conditionalities. In these moments, internationalisation became a mechanism through which external priorities outweighed Indigenous knowledge, local expertise, and community needs.

The case studies also demonstrate that internationalisation is not rejected; it is reinterpreted. National universities are re-imagining global engagement in ways that foreground Indigenous ethics of relationality, collective responsibility and intellectual reciprocity. Rather than viewing partnerships as transactions or as leverage to access research funding or opportunities for institutional branding, they emphasised the importance of relationships grounded in respect, humility, reciprocity, and long-term commitment. Practices such as *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian* were described not only as research methodologies and pedagogical practices, but also as mediums for partnership building. The framework of *motutapu*, although not expressly named in each case study, resonated strongly through partnerships in shared spaces, where trust is established, power imbalances are acknowledged, and shared purposes are negotiated.

This reorientation gives rise to what can be conceptualised as a form of relational knowledge diplomacy. Unlike conventional academic diplomacy, which often prioritises institutional prestige or geopolitical influence, relational knowledge diplomacy begins with the responsibilities embedded in relationships: to communities, to cultural continuity, and to the ethical exchange of knowledge. It frames internationalisation not as an import-export system, but as a dialogue in which multiple epistemologies are valued at this interface, and where the purpose of collaboration is collective benefit rather than competitive advantage. It requires that international partners enter into relationships with openness to Indigenous intellectual authority, a willingness to adjust their practices and expectations, and recognition that the metrics commonly used to define ‘quality’ and ‘success’ in higher education do not have universal meaning.

The five case studies show that this relational approach is already underway. In Samoa, concerns about extractive MOUs and research sparked calls for deeper, more reciprocal partnerships. In Tonga and Fiji, Indigenous values such as *tauhi vā* and *vanua* were used explicitly to assess whether international collaboration aligned with national and cultural priorities. In the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, participants stressed the need for partnerships that supported sovereignty in curriculum development, research agendas and *kastom*-informed institutional governance. Across all contexts, the emphasis was clear; internationalisation is

most meaningful when undertaken through relationships that honour the knowledge systems, identities and aspirations of local communities.

Re-envisioning internationalisation through relational knowledge diplomacy offers a pathway for national universities in Moana Oceania to participate in global academic spaces while resisting assimilation into dominant epistemic regimes. It positions national universities not as recipients of global knowledge, but as contributors of culturally grounded, socially relevant and intellectually rigorous scholarship. By reframing the terms of engagement, national universities assert that global participation can, and must, be shaped by the ethical and cultural commitments of the region, rather than solely by external expectations.

To shift the dominance of a settler-colonial, neo-liberal model of higher education, we must counteract the perpetuation of colonial legacies and “generate spaces beyond the colonial institutions that invest in and centre indigeneity and cultural context[s]” (Patel, 2015, p.3). We must acknowledge the spaces in which we engage people’s relationship to their lands, seas and natural resources, and honour their relationality. The lexicon utilised in higher education scholarship must be inclusive of the conceptualisations of diverse epistemologies and ontologies. There is significance in placing the concept of *motutapu and wansolwara* as conceptual frameworks for this study. It provides a critical perspective on the relationships among peoples, the places and spaces in which they interact, and the values placed on the process of negotiating relationality rather than on its outputs. Within these spaces, and in viewing the knowledge shared by participants through multiple case studies, frameworks and methodologies, we gain more authentic and diverse conceptualisations of higher education internationalisation.

Conceptual Contribution: The Relational University

The findings from this research, together with its methodological groundings in the Moana Oceania philosophies of *motutapu* and *wansolwara*, for example, point towards a distinctive way of understanding nationally oriented higher education as the **Relational University**...

not a hierarchy, but an ecology;

not a site of extraction, but of reciprocity;

not a recipient of global knowledge, but

a generator of Indigenous and globally relevant knowledge.

This conceptual contribution, born of this research, recognises that universities in Moana Oceania are shaped not only by policy frameworks and institutional structures, but also by ethical commitments embedded in relationships among people, lands, seas, ancestors, and knowledge. The Relational University serves as a way of naming, framing and theorising how these commitments are enacted within contemporary higher education systems in Moana Oceania.

At its core, the Relational University rejects the assumption that universities are primarily competitive actors in a global market of knowledge. Instead, it understands them as part of an interconnected ecology, where responsibility to communities precedes aspirations for prestige or ranking. This orientation is grounded in Indigenous values that have guided knowledge transmission for generations. Across different contexts, these values emphasise reciprocity, humility, relational balance and collective well-being. They shape both the purposes of locally focused higher education in Moana Oceania and how institutions navigate internal and external pressures.

Several interlinked features characterise the Relational University. First, it locates knowledge within cultural, spiritual and genealogical worlds across time-place-space, rather than isolating it as an abstract commodity. This has implications for curriculum, research and governance. In practical terms, these implications influence what is taught, how it is taught, and whose knowledge is legitimised within institutional structures. Second, it prioritises relationships as the foundation of decision-making. Leadership, partnerships and policy choices are guided not only by strategic plans, but by obligations to maintain harmony, uphold cultural integrity and nurture the relational spaces that connect individuals, communities and national universities. Third, the Relational University positions national universities as anchors of cultural identity and future-making. They are entrusted with safeguarding languages, traditions and community aspirations, while also equipping learners to navigate global contexts without eroding local values.

Crucially, the Relational University offers an alternative vision for international engagement. Rather than viewing global partnerships as mechanisms for accessing prestige, resources or legitimacy, it situated them within an ethic of relational knowledge diplomacy. Partnerships are evaluated not by their outputs or alignment with external benchmarks, but by the extent to which they foster mutual learning, respect epistemic diversity, and deliver impactful outcomes that benefit communities. This reframing disrupts familiar hierarchies that place institutions of the

Global North at the centre of knowledge production and encourages new forms of collaboration that honour Indigenous intellectual sovereignty.

The concept of the Relational University, therefore, extends beyond descriptive analysis. It provides a theoretical lens through which to understand how higher education can be practised differently, how institutions can commit to values that prioritise equity, cultural continuity and shared responsibility while still operating within a global system. It also contributes to broader debates on decolonising higher education, demonstrating that transformative possibilities emerge not only through policy reforms but also through reconfiguring the relationships that underpin knowledge creation. In articulating this construct, the study highlights that universities in Moana Oceania are not peripheral actors but sources of conceptual innovation, offering insights that speak to global movements towards more ethical, culturally grounded, and relational forms of higher education.

Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

This research makes contributions at both theoretical and methodological levels, drawing together Indigenous philosophies, critical higher education scholarship and collaborative sensemaking. These contributions emerge not only from the findings themselves but also from how knowledge was generated, interpreted, and situated within Moana Oceania.

Theoretically, the study advances understanding of how national universities in large ocean island nations navigate the layered demands of national development, regional cooperation and global engagement. Existing literature often frames these dynamics through external policy drivers, economic dependencies or structural constraints (usually a deficit-oriented lens). While these forces undoubtedly shape institutional behaviours, the findings demonstrate that they do not fully account for universities' decision-making processes in the region. Instead, the study highlights the centrality of Indigenous relational ethics, grounded in respect, reciprocity, humility and service, as foundational to how institutions define relevance, negotiate partnerships and articulate their aspirations. These reframing challenges universalist assumptions embedded in mainstream higher education theory, which often treat institutions as autonomous actors shaped primarily by rational choice or market competition.

The conceptualisation of the Relational University contributes a new lens through which to understand higher education systems grounded in Moana Oceania Indigenous worldviews.

Rather than interpreting institutional actions as deviations from global norms, this model foregrounds the cultural and ethical logics that guide national universities in the region. It offers an alternative to neoliberal framings of internationalisation and to deficit narratives that portray these nations as merely responsive to external pressures. By articulating a theory that centres relationality, knowledge sovereignty and cultural continuity, the study expands the conceptual vocabulary available for examining higher education in postcolonial and Indigenous contexts more broadly.

The thesis also contributes to theory by offering a more contextually grounded account of policy transfer in higher education. Most policy transfer scholarship has examined how policies travel across systems, often focusing on adoption, convergence, borrowing, or implementation. However, the findings of this study suggest that such frameworks are insufficient when applied to national universities in Moana Oceania unless they take fuller account of colonial legacies, donor influence, regional politics, and Indigenous epistemic claims. Across the five case studies, policy movement was rarely linear. Instead, universities engaged in forms of negotiated translation, selectively adapting, reinterpreting, or resisting externally circulating agendas in order to align them, where possible, with national priorities and institutional responsibilities.

This thesis employs a unique methodological approach that adapts standard Education Sector Analysis (ESA) tools. This adaptation utilises an Indigenous and Moana-centred critical policy lens, fundamentally reworking the tools to prioritise power dynamics, relationality, and context within tertiary education systems. By bringing together Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) with *talanoa/tok stori/storian* methodologies and collaborative sensemaking, the research illustrates a method for analysing policy architectures and lived leadership experiences in an integrated manner, rather than separately. This integrated approach is designed to centre Indigenous knowledges and priorities. The research demonstrates the value of bringing Indigenous and Euro-Western approaches into a purposeful, balanced relationship. The use of *talanoa*, *tok stori*, and *storian* created dialogic spaces in which participants could speak from within their cultural frameworks, rather than adjusting their narratives to fit the expectations of extractive research traditions. These approaches enabled deeper exploration of the values, tensions, and aspirations driving university practice, as participants shaped the direction of the conversations, co-constructed meaning, and contributed to the analysis through collaborative sensemaking.

The collaborative sensemaking process was particularly significant. By returning preliminary interpretations to participants for reflection, refinement and critique, the research honoured

relational commitments while also strengthening validity. This approach moved beyond consultation to genuine intellectual partnership, ensuring space for participants to guide, challenge and deepen the emergent findings. It also reinforced the ethical stance that knowledge shared in research is relationally held, rather than owned by the researcher. As stated by Dyck et al. (2022), “When cared for, the *vā* as a space of interconnection and relational sense-making can lead to feelings and experiences of *mana* (inspiration, empowerment)” (p.37).

In combining Indigenous methodologies with critical higher education analysis, the study offers a methodological contribution that resists both the romanticisation of cultural practices and the rigidity of conventional academic protocols. Instead, it demonstrates how culturally grounded approaches can coexist with, and indeed enrich, scholarly inquiry. This methodological hybridity provides a model for future research seeking to honour Indigenous epistemologies while engaging robustly with global academic discourse.

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings of this study have practical implications for the work of national universities, governments and international partners across Moana Oceania. They point towards a shift in practice that honours Indigenous values, supports institutional autonomy and strengthens the capacity of national universities to serve their communities. These implications do not prescribe solutions, but highlight principles that can guide more equitable, culturally grounded and relational forms of higher education. The recommendations stemming from this research are grounded in a dual evidence base: a critical policy analysis of existing national, regional, and institutional policy architectures, and the narratives shared through *talanoa/tok stori/storian* and collaborative sensemaking. This comprehensive approach links high-level policy settings with the everyday realities, aspirations, and constraints experienced by those leading and working within national universities across Moana Oceania, significantly enhancing the relevance of these recommendations for ministers, senior officials, and university leaders.

National governments occupy a central role in shaping the conditions under which national universities operate. The research underscores the importance of aligning higher education policy with each nation's cultural foundations and development priorities, rather than adapting local practice to externally generated frameworks. When policy recognises the knowledge embedded in Indigenous languages, genealogies and relationships, universities are better positioned to strengthen national identity and respond to community needs. This requires

sustained investment, not only in physical infrastructure and workforce development, but also in the cultural, research, and epistemic capacities that enable institutions to uphold knowledge sovereignty.

Within universities, the implications are equally significant. Institutional governance, curriculum design and partnership strategies all benefit from practices that foreground relational ethics. When decision-making processes are guided by values such as reciprocity, humility, and collective responsibility, tensions between national relevance and global participation become easier to navigate. Strengthening Indigenous leadership within academic and administrative structures ensures that culturally grounded perspectives shape the direction of institutional development. At the same time, supporting staff and students to engage confidently with global scholarship, without compromising local values, enables universities to participate on their own terms in international academic discussions.

For regional bodies and international partners, the study points towards a shift in collaboration. Partnerships are most effective when built on long-term relationships rather than short-term projects, and when they recognise the intellectual leadership of national universities. This requires moving away from forms of cooperation driven by external priorities or predefined agendas. When international engagement begins with relational accountability, careful listening, sharing authority, and co-constructing purpose, it becomes an opportunity for mutual learning rather than a mechanism of influence. The case studies illustrate that universities are willing collaborators when partnerships demonstrate respect for Indigenous epistemologies and contribute meaningfully to community aspirations.

The practical implications of this research challenge familiar assumptions about higher education development in large ocean island nations. They suggest that strengthening national universities is not a matter of importing global solutions, but of deepening the cultural and relational foundations that already exist. By recognising the authority of Indigenous knowledge and fostering partnerships grounded in ethical responsibility, governments, national universities and international actors can contribute to higher education systems that are both culturally resonant and globally engaged.

The study also extends critiques of uncritical education policy transfer (Crossley, 2019) by showing that the key issue is not whether external policies move, but how they are made meaningful, contested, and re-situated in specific places. The concept of the relational

university is relevant here, because it highlights that institutional decision-making is shaped by formal policy logics, as well as by relationships of accountability to nation, community, culture, and place. While the case studies are regionally specific, in settings where higher education institutions operate within asymmetrical global structures while remaining accountable to local histories and knowledge systems, policy transfer is better understood as a relationally mediated and politically contested process of translation rather than as straightforward borrowing. Practically, this means that regional organisations, development partners, and international higher education actors should be cautious of policy approaches that assume transferability without deep contextual engagement. The findings suggest that effective policy engagement in Moana Oceania depends less on replicating external models and more on processes of dialogue, relational accountability, and locally grounded translation. Policies and partnerships are more likely to be meaningful when they begin from national priorities and Indigenous values rather than treating these as secondary adaptations to already-formed external agendas.

Emerging Opportunities, Persistent Challenges & Notable Practices

National Universities in Moana Oceania demonstrate a strong commitment to advancing national priorities through culturally grounded curricula, context-responsive research agendas and enduring service to communities. These commitments are evident in the prominence of Indigenous languages, the integration of local ethical frameworks, and the emphasis on knowledge that directly contributes to social, cultural, economic, and community wellbeing. The realisation of these aspirations is uneven due to under-resourced facilities, leadership instability, and the ongoing influence of colonial educational legacies, which constrain their ability to sustain culturally responsive practices at scale. The tensions between aspiration and structural limitation remain a defining feature of the sector.

Regionalism offers a seascape of both opportunity and risk. Institutions such as the University of the South Pacific and frameworks such as PacREF provide valuable spaces for knowledge-sharing, standard-setting, and collective capacity-building. They create pathways for knowledge and labour mobility and elevate the visibility of higher education in the region. At the same time, regional mechanisms can dilute national specificity when they promote standardised curricula, externally defined competencies or administrative models that do not align with local priorities. Concerns about the dominance of larger regional institutions and the

uneven distribution of benefits highlight the need for reciprocity, responsiveness and a reshaping of leadership in regional cooperation.

Internationalisation introduces another set of dynamics. External partnerships bring funding, mobility and recognition, but they also risk entrenching hierarchies that position Western academic norms as universal standards. When global benchmarks become the primary measure of quality, Indigenous knowledge systems can be marginalised or treated as supplementary rather than authoritative. Participants across case studies described pressures to conform to external expectations even when those expectations undermined institutional priorities or cultural values. The challenge lies in reshaping international engagement to strengthen rather than erode knowledge sovereignty.

Despite these pressures, the case studies reveal a range of emerging opportunities and notable practices that illustrate how national universities are re-imagining their futures. Several institutions are developing hybrid governance models that blend Indigenous and Euro-Western approaches, ensuring that decision-making reflects both relational ethics and contemporary institutional needs. Many are experimenting with new ways to bring people together around shared priorities through collaborative curriculum design, community-based research, and culturally grounded leadership development.

Concrete examples across the region illustrate this innovation. At the Fiji National University, initiatives such as the qualification in *vanua* leadership and the expansion of Indigenous knowledge conferences signal a commitment to embedding cultural authority within academic practice. The Solomon Islands National University, through the Centre for Islands Futures, positions local scholarship at the heart of national and regional development. Tonga National University advances linguistic and culturally embedded education through its bilingual academic journal, early childhood education qualification and language and culture initiatives. At the National University of Samoa, the institutional Samoanisation agenda, the Centre for Samoan Studies and the university's journal foreground Indigenous epistemologies as central to institutional identity. The National University of Vanuatu strengthens its cultural commitments through the development of its language and culture centre and their national research database, designed to support knowledge sovereignty.

Beyond the national level, the Melanesian Spearhead Group's collaborations with national universities demonstrate the potential for sub-regional partnerships that are both culturally grounded and politically coherent. Emerging inter-Moana University national university partnerships show a similar orientation, emphasising shared histories, genealogies and ethical responsibilities as the basis for collaboration.

The study also identifies persistent challenges that require careful attention. A recurring theme is the misalignment between external systems and the priorities of national universities and communities. In this context, 'external' refers not only to actors outside the region, but also to policies, expectations, or institutional logics that originate within national contexts but outside specific cultural contexts. Such systems often define success in terms that do not resonate with Indigenous values. During *talanoa*, *tok stori* and *storian* sessions, participants emphasised that the most meaningful forms of success are relational, long-term and community-oriented. However, these are rarely captured by prevailing metrics. Questions of ownership also surfaced, particularly regarding curriculum, research agendas and the knowledge generated through partnerships. Without clear respect for local authority, external engagement risks becoming extractive.

These opportunities and challenges illustrate the complexity of national higher education in Moana Oceania. They also reveal institutions that are actively negotiating the boundaries of autonomy, cultural integrity and global participation. The case studies also highlight the potential for innovation when universities draw on Indigenous values as a source of strength rather than treat them as constraints. This relational, culturally anchored approach offers a foundation for higher education futures that are locally meaningful and globally connected.

Research Limitations

Like all research, this study was shaped by limitations that influenced its scope and interpretation of its findings. These limitations do not diminish the value of the inquiry but clarify the contextual and methodological boundaries within which the analysis was undertaken.

The first limitation relates to positionality and access. As an external researcher working across multiple national contexts, my perspectives were shaped by the relationships I formed and the cultural protocols that structured those engagements. While the use of *talanoa*, *tok stori* and *storian* created relational spaces that supported trust and openness, they also required careful navigation of cultural expectations and permissions. Insights were therefore influenced by the particular people, times and places in which conversations unfolded.

A second limitation is the study's geographic and temporal scope. Conducting fieldwork across five countries inevitably meant that time in each context was finite. Although the research captured a breadth of institutional perspectives, it could not document the full diversity of

experiences within each national university. The post-pandemic context further shaped availability, institutional rhythms and priorities, affecting the timing and depth of some engagements.

A third limitation arises from the study's multiple-case study design. The inclusion of five national universities offers valuable cross-case insights, yet it also carries the risk of obscuring local nuances if distinctions are over-generalised. Care has been taken to avoid flattening distinct cultural, political and institutional contexts, but the act of synthesis necessarily abstracts from the depth of each case. Samoa was the first of the five case studies to be explored with research participants. As a result, I recognise, upon reflection, that I was still getting my bearings with the research focus and approach. This could be one of the limitations to greater narrative representation in this case study.

Finally, the interpretation of findings was shaped by the methodological hybridity that underpinned the research. Bringing Indigenous and Euro-Western approaches into relationships created rich possibilities for meaning-making, yet it also involved balancing different epistemic expectations. The collaborative sensemaking process mitigated this to some extent, allowing participants to refine and challenge emerging interpretations, but it cannot wholly eliminate the interpretative influence of the research.

These limitations offer important reminders about the complexity of relational research in diverse cultural settings. They also signal areas where future inquiry can deepen, including work led entirely by emerging Indigenous scholars and studies that extend the temporal and contextual reach of this research.

Future Research Directions

The findings of this study open a range of pathways for future research on higher education in Moana Oceania and on Indigenous approaches to university development more broadly. Several areas hold potential for deepening understanding and extending the contributions of this thesis.

One clear avenue lies in research led by emerging Indigenous scholars within each national context. While this study sought to honour Indigenous epistemologies and centre relational methodologies, it also recognises the importance of expanding space for Indigenous leadership in higher education research. Studies designed, conducted, and interpreted entirely within local

cultural frameworks would offer insights inaccessible to external researchers and further strengthen national research capacity.

This study did not include students as participants. The focus was deliberately on policy, leadership, and institutional actors responsible for shaping national university priorities and regional and global engagements. Student perspectives could be an area for future research.

There is also value in a more sustained, longitudinal inquiry within the individual national universities. This study captured a moment in time across five national contexts. However, the regional institutional landscapes continue to evolve in response to political change, demographic pressures, environmental challenges, and shifting regional dynamics. Long-term research would illuminate how universities adapt to these changes, how relational leadership practices develop over time, and how institutional commitments to knowledge sovereignty are sustained or contested.

Comparative research beyond Moana Oceania provides a further horizon. Bridging Moana Oceania experiences into dialogue with other Indigenous higher education systems would deepen understanding of how Indigenous institutions navigate global pressures, sustain cultural integrity and define success on their own terms. Such comparative work would contribute to global conversations on decolonising higher education, highlighting both shared challenges and distinctive strengths.

Finally, the concept of the Relational University offers a foundation for future theoretical development. Further work could examine how relational ethics influence institutional governance, academic workloads, partnerships, curriculum structures and research priorities. Research that explores how relationality is enacted in practice, with all its complexities, tensions and contradictions, would help refine the model and extend relevance within and beyond the region.

These future research areas point towards a growing field of scholarship that is culturally grounded, relational and locally led. They also highlight the potential for future research to contribute not only to academic debates but also to strengthening higher education systems that honour Indigenous knowledge, uphold community priorities, and articulate futures shaped by the values of Moana Oceania.

Closing Reflections

This study set out to understand how national universities in Moana Oceania navigate the entangled pressures of national priorities, regional cooperation and global expectations. Across five distinct contexts, it became clear that policy architectures or resource constraints do not simply shape these institutions, but are shaped by the ethical, genealogical, and relational foundations that have sustained knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing across generations. The analysis has shown that universities in the region act as sites of cultural continuity, political aspiration and epistemic sovereignty, even when operating within systems that do not always recognise these roles.

The research has also highlighted the creativity and determination with which national universities negotiate their responsibilities. They do so by grounding institutional choices in the values that define their communities, safeguarding their knowledge systems, and reconfiguring external relationships on their own terms. The Relational University is proposed here not as a definitive model, but as a conceptual articulation of what already exists in practice. National universities of Moana Oceania draw strength from their connections to land, language and people, and that is an approach to development and international engagement which centres the ethics of reciprocity, humility and shared responsibility.

By bringing these insights together, this chapter marks the formal conclusion of the thesis's analytical arc. It does not, however, mark the conclusion of the research itself. Relational work continues beyond analysis and lives in the responsibilities that accompany the sharing of knowledge, the return of insights to those who shaped it and the collaborative pathway that unfolds afterwards. In Moana Oceania, research does not end at the moment of writing. It circulates, returns, and takes new forms as it moves through communities, institutions and relationships.

For this reason, this thesis is followed by an atypical chapter focused on dissemination. The decision to include it reflects an ethical stance that findings do not belong to the academy, and that their value is realised only when they are returned in accessible, dialogic and culturally grounded ways. The Dissemination chapter sets out how this research will continue its life beyond the thesis, through *talanoa*, *tok stori* and *storian*, co-designed briefs, institutional dialogues, and scholarly work that brings the contributions of Moana Oceania into global conversations.

The doctoral journey, therefore, concludes not with closure, but with opening. The findings presented here represent one moment in an ongoing cycle of relational accountability. As they travel back to the universities, ministries, communities and collaborators who shaped them, they will continue to evolve. This is how the work remains alive: through the conversations that revisit its insights, the policies and programmes it may help inform, and the futures imagined by the people and places at the heart of this study.

As a researcher with deep relational and ethical commitments, this journey of collaborating alongside people, places and stories has been one of the greatest honours and learnings of my life. I therefore close this thesis with a reaffirmation of relational accountability and collective hope. Knowledge, like Moana Oceania itself, is fluid and interconnected; it demands navigation with care, humility, and courage. National universities of Moana Oceania stand at a threshold, charting futures that honour ancestral wisdom while engaging the world on their own terms. Through nurturing relational, ethical, and context-centred scholarship, national universities of Moana Oceania can continue to inspire a global re-imagining of what it means to learn, teach, and serve.

Chapter 11. Research Dissemination

This chapter is an intentional and atypical inclusion in a doctoral thesis. It is offered as evidence of my ethical commitment to relational, reciprocal, and context-responsive research in Moana Oceania. Rather than treating dissemination as an afterthought to knowledge production, I choose to position it as a practice through which relationships are renewed, responsibilities are honoured, and knowledge returns to the communities and institutions that shaped it. Grounded in relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), Moana Oceania research ethics, and *vanua* epistemology (Nabobo-Baba, 2006), I articulate an approach to dissemination that is dialogic, situated, and action-oriented. The plan leans towards institutional and policy/practice audiences (e.g. national universities, ministries, qualifications and quality assurance authorities, and development partners) while maintaining a scholarly dissemination pathway. It aims to move knowledge to practice by enabling collaborative sensemaking and co-creation of next steps in ways that centre Indigenous values, languages, and aspirations. A PhD thesis can be viewed as merely an academic exercise, a procedural gatekeeper to a hierarchical structure of the knowledge economy. However, the majority of researchers engaged in decolonial, transformative, and Indigenous-focussed research look to the potential influence and impact of their research. In choosing to include this chapter in my PhD thesis, I demonstrate my commitment to relational accountability and reciprocity in research spaces.

Rationale

I approach dissemination as a practice of relational return, a cycle of bringing findings ‘back home’ through purposeful activities that elevate Indigenous knowledge systems, increase accessibility, and support policy and institutional improvement (Airini et al., 2010; Smith & Munshi, 2023). In Moana Oceania, knowledge travels through relationships, across *vanua/fonua/’aina*, familial networks, professional communities, and regional currents. As such, I privilege culturally responsive mediums of relational engagement that are dialogic (*talanoa*, *tok stori*, *storian*), collaborative, and oriented to co-learning and mutual benefit (Cammock et al., 2021; Fa’avae, 2019; Johansson-Fua, 2020).

Relational accountability requires that I remain answerable to the participants, institutions, places and to the knowledge itself (Wilson, 2008). Dissemination is therefore not a one-way engagement, but a braided process of exchanging interpretations, validating findings, and co-designing practical activities. I also draw on the interface of working between Indigenous and

Western knowledge traditions (Barlett et al., 2012; Durie, 2004), *motutapu* (Johansson-Fua, 2020) and *wansolwara* (Johansson-Fua, 2022), as bridging metaphors seeking to expand options rather than collapse differences. This sits alongside Moana Oceania pedagogical commitments to culturally responsive methodologies and ethical praxis (Berryman et al., 2013; Ponton, 2018; Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2013), and the literature on reciprocity, co-production, and knowledge exchange (Knowles et al., 2021; Trainor & Bouchard, 2012; Weir et al., 2024).

Approach to Dissemination

While the thesis is a significant scholarly output, it is not by itself a sufficient vehicle for impact. To ensure accessibility and usefulness, the dissemination strategy employs multiple, complementary modes:

1. Relational knowledge-return and validation

I will convene feedback *fono* with each participating institution and relevant ministries to share findings, invite critique, and co-identify implications for policy, strategy and programme improvement. These will be facilitated using *talanoa/tok stori/storian* approaches (Cammock et al., 2021; Feetham et al., 2023), with explicit attention to power dynamics and equitable voice (Fay et al., 2021; Finlay, 2002).

2. Policy/practice briefs and institutional memos

I will co-develop succinct, tailored briefs that translate findings into actionable options for leaders in national universities, ministries, and agencies. Consistent with ongoing relational commitments (Airini et al., 2010), these documents focus on policy linkages, outlining what the evidence suggests, how it aligns with national priorities, and what practical steps could be taken in ways that respect local protocols and institutional rhythms.

3. Co-authored and co-presented outputs

Where appropriate, I will invite collaborators from national universities and relevant stakeholders to co-author briefs, case notes, or short commentaries, acknowledging the collective labour of knowledge generation (Allen et al., 2022; Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017). Co-presentation at national or regional fora will help normalise collaborative authorship and increase the legitimacy of relational outputs.

4. Community-facing knowledge translations

Short, plain-language summaries will be developed, with options for translation into local languages where feasible (Hemi & Aporosa, 2021). These pieces aim to engage

students, staff, parents, and community leaders, ensuring findings are accessible beyond policy and academic circles (Airini et al., 2010; Flavell & Cunningham, 2023).

5. Scholarly dissemination

I will submit journal articles (co-authored where possible) that speak to comparative and international higher education, Indigenous and decolonial methodologies, and educational policy/leadership. This pathway makes visible Moana Oceania's contributions to global debates and invites productive dialogue with peers internationally (Smith & Munshi, 2023; Stein & Andreotti, 2016).

These modes are bound together by ethical protocols that give effect to Moana Oceania research ethics, such as robust and ongoing consent for public-facing materials, careful de-identification where appropriate, acknowledgement of contributions, transparency about the limits of inference, and protection of sensitive institutional information (Du Plessis & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2009; Reid et al., 2021; Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2013). A summary report of the research findings and a link to the final thesis will also be sent to each participant and their institutions to ensure they receive the detailed findings of the co-constructed research.

Country-Level Dissemination Strategies

Because context matters, I will further shape dissemination with attention to each national university's mandate, the policy landscape, and the existing ecosystem of agencies and partners. The following country narratives outline initial pathways. In practice, final activities will be co-designed with local collaborators and adjusted to timing, resourcing, and institutional priorities.

Samoa

In Samoa, I will engage with the National University of Samoa (NUS) and relevant agencies (e.g., Samoa Qualifications Authority (SQA); Ministry of Education & Culture (MEC)) through an initial *talanoa* to share overall findings, followed by a focused workshop on implications for programme development, student pathways, and knowledge sovereignty within NUS's institutional strategy. Subject to interest and timing, I will offer a research seminar at NUS and explore a co-authored contribution to the Journal of Samoan Studies (<https://nus.edu.ws/volumes>) in accessible prose that links the study's findings to national priorities. I will also explore a collaborative presentation at a future Measina A Conference, hosted by NUS. In line with relational commitments (Airini et al., 2010), the dissemination will emphasise trust-building, continuity, and co-creation through a short institutional memo

outlining options for further work (e.g., curriculum renewal, community knowledge partnerships, professional learning on Indigenous methodologies). This approach aligns with Moana Oceania scholarship on relational-centred improvements (Berryman et al., 2013; Johansson-Fua, 2020) and invites cross-agency dialogue on evidence-informed policy uptake (Knowles et al., 2021).

Tonga

For Tonga, dissemination will be facilitated through *talanoa* with Tonga National University (TNU), the Ministry of Education and Training (MET), and the Tonga National Qualifications and Accreditation Board (TNQAB). I will propose a policy/practice brief shaped around Tongan educational values and *motutapu* as a relational space for collaborative work (Johansson-Fua, 2020), as well as a co-authored practitioner piece for the *Tokoni Faiako* Tonga Journal of Education. In the spirit of *Tatala 'a e Koloa 'o e To 'utangata Tonga* (Fa'avae, 2019), the focus will be on surfacing the relationships, language, and identities as resources for institutional strengthening. Where feasible, I will co-present with Tongan colleagues at sector fora and embed practical tools (e.g., templates for programme-level *talanoa* reviews, relational indicators to inform quality processes).

Solomon Islands

In the Solomon Islands, I will convene *tok stori* with the Solomon Islands National University (SINU), the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD), and the Solomon Islands Tertiary Education and Skills Authority (SITESA), with a view to co-designing a short set of action notes on institutional positioning, local knowledge partnerships, and student support. *Stori*-based, dialogic processes are particularly well-suited to the collaborative interpretation and translation of findings and to shaping realistic next steps within resource-constrained settings (Cammock et al., 2021; Feetham et al., 2023). I will also explore regional presentation opportunities (e.g., the annual Melanesian National University Symposium) to foster peer learning among institutions facing shared challenges, while respecting that uptake is strengthened when relationships and contexts are centred (Weir et al., 2024).

Vanuatu

For Vanuatu, the National University of Vanuatu (NUV), the Vanuatu Qualifications Authority (VQA), and the Ministry of Education and Training (MET) are key relational partners. A co-facilitated workshop will prioritise practical institutional questions (e.g. how to embed local knowledge in programme design; how to align quality processes with relational ethics), and I will collaborate on a trilingual plain-language summary suitable for circulation via university channels and community networks. Where appropriate, an institutional memo will outline next-step options (e.g. small pilot projects, staff development *storian*, or a knowledge exchange with peer national universities). I will also collaborate with NUV to elevate their Digital Research Portal (<https://portal.univ.edu.vu/en/>) as both a regional resource and a potential replicable practice in other contexts.

Fiji

In Fiji, I will engage with the Fiji National University (FNU), the Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC), relevant ministries, and relevant partners on pathways towards policy uptake and sectoral development. A targeted, co-authored policy brief will translate findings into options for strengthening national university roles in strategy, planning, and quality. At the same time, a community-facing summary will help connect institutional direction with student and community expectations. I will also explore a cross-institutional seminar that draws together colleagues from universities, agencies, and development partners to deliberate on feasible, staged actions consistent with relationship-centred policy practice (Airini et al., 2010) and with co-production that is mindful of “productive tensions” (Knowles et al., 2021, p.2) and two-way learning (Bartlett et al., 2012).

Across all five countries, my intent is not to prescribe solutions, but to offer well-evidenced options for local adaptation. This orientation aligns with ethical scholarship in cross-cultural settings (Du Plessis & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2009; Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2013) and with the Moana Oceania leadership literature, which calls for collective, future-oriented approaches that centre Moana Oceania voices (Allen et al., 2022).

Translating Findings for Practice

To ensure broad reach and practical uptake, I will co-produce layered outputs that can travel through different relational channels:

- *Policy/practice briefs* for ministries, national universities, and agencies, tailored to each country's context, with short boxes that link evidence to feasible actions.
- *Institutional memos* focusing on a specific decision domain (e.g. programme review metrics that recognise Indigenous methodologies; staff development for relational supervision; partnerships with communities for place-based learning).
- *Plain-language summaries*, in multiple languages, for community-facing dissemination, including infographics.
- *Scholarly papers* advancing conceptual contributions (e.g. knowledge sovereignty in national universities; braided relational accountability in higher education reform) to situate Moana Oceania scholarship within global discourse (Smith & Munshi, 2023; Stein & Andreotti, 2016).

These outputs will be designed for accessibility and circulation via existing institutional channels (websites, newsletters, staff fora). I will prioritise open-access routes or self-archiving, and I will provide digital and print-ready packages that institutions can adapt for their own platforms.

Methodological Stance in Dissemination

I will facilitate dissemination activities as deliberative spaces that welcome “productive tensions” (p. 2), not to be resolved quickly but held generatively as shared challenges to practice (Knowles et al., 2021). This stance calls for careful facilitation, clear ground rules, and time for reflection. It also calls for reflexivity, acknowledging my positionalities and the ways my interpretations are shaped by the relationships and sites through which this research unfolded (Finlay, 2002; Flavell & Cunningham, 2023).

Relational methodologies (*talanoa*, *tok stori*, *storian*) will remain central, aligned with Moana Oceania scholarship that views methodologies as ethics and pedagogy (Berryman et al., 2013; Cammock et al., 2021; Fa’avae, 2019). Dissemination activities thus double as professional learning, enabling two-way knowledge flow between institutions and communities (Bartlett et

al., 2012). Moana Oceania Indigenous epistemologies facilitate the operationalisation of relational commitments to belonging, reciprocity, and responsibility in the approach to dissemination (Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

Challenges and Enablers

Dissemination in resource-constrained, policy-dense environments faces practical (time, resourcing, competing priorities), attitudinal (research fatigue, scepticism), access (paywalls, connectivity, language), and privacy challenges. I will strive to address these by:

- Co-design scope and timeline with host institutions to fit existing planning cycles, communication schedules, scheduled staff development days and/or sector events;
- Providing multiple formats to accommodate different audiences and connectivity;
- Practising informed consent and ethical review for public-facing materials, including careful de-identification where appropriate (Du Plessis & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2009; Reid et al., 2021);
- Engaging trusted messengers and local champions within universities or ministries who can host, endorse, and carry messages into decision-making spaces (Airini et al., 2010; Allen et al., 2022); and,
- Framing recommendations as options with staged pathways, which respect institutional agency and pace.

I will attempt to track reach (who engages and how), use (how materials are re-shared or cited), and influence (evidence of ideas shaping plans, policies or programmes), while recognising that quantitative metrics are blunt instruments and should be complemented by qualitative feedback and narratives of change (Weir et al., 2024). Letters of support or short testimonies from institutional partners can provide evidence of value without instrumentalising relationships.

Ethical Textures: Centring Indigenous Knowledge and Voice

At the heart of this dissemination approach is a refusal to treat Indigenous knowledge as a ‘local’ add-on. Instead, the plan affirms Indigenous knowledge systems as central to educational development in Moana Oceania (Koya-Vaka’uta, 2017; Ponton, 2018; Smith & Munshi, 2023). This entails:

- Valuing local languages in interpretation, not only translation;

- Designing for epistemic hospitality, where institutional spaces make room for Indigenous values, metaphors and protocols (Berryman et al., 2013; Johansson-Fua, 2020);
- Recognising community authority in knowledge production and use; and,
- Documenting process, not just product, so others can learn how relational dissemination unfolds and what it requires (Allen et al., 2022; Knowles et al., 2021).

This ethical orientation aligns with decolonial and Indigenous calls to re-centre ways of knowing, being, and doing (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003; Stein & Andreotti, 2016), and threads the practicalities of briefs, workshops, and memos. In this sense, dissemination demonstrates that research can be conducted and shared in ways that strengthen Indigenous futures.

Scholarly Contributions

While the emphasis is on institutional and policy/practice audiences, scholarly pathways remain crucial for situating Moana Oceania within global conversations on higher education and decolonisation. I will therefore co-author journal manuscripts that:

- Conceptualise knowledge sovereignty in the specific institutional form of national universities;
- Elaborate braided relational accountability as a dissemination ethic; and,
- Analyse policy translation in Indigenous, island and postcolonial contexts, attending to how relationship-centred practices shape implementation and learning (Airini et al., 2010; Weir et al., 2024).

Conference presentations will likewise be pursued with co-authorship where possible, reinforcing the norm that research about institutions is presented with them.

Since the beginning of the doctoral journey (February 2023), the following dissemination activities have been completed, and informed by this research (*in order from most recent*):

- **Levy, B.** (2026, March). *Sacred Shores, Shared Seas: Reframing National Universities in Moana Oceania as Sites of Epistemic Sovereignty and Indigenous Futures* [Paper Presentation]. Comparative & International Education Society (CIES) 70th Annual Conference. San Francisco, CA, USA.

- **Levy, B.** (2026, February). *Sacred shores, shared seas: Reframing and reclaiming higher education for Indigenous futures* [Paper Presentation]. 25th International Graduate Student Conference, East-West Centre, Honolulu, HI, USA.
- Co-design of the *University of the South Pacific – Australia Partnership (2026-32)*: Catalpa International & Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Australia, 2025 - 2026.
 - Individual Deliverable #1 (01 December 2025): Delivered a presentation and facilitated discussion for the Catalpa Design team and DFAT Staff, and produced a comprehensive strategic policy brief, both informed by the PhD research findings on national universities.
 - Individual Deliverable #2: Lead the development of photo journals and follow-up interviews with students from the eight campuses that the Design Team is not able to visit;
 - Individual Deliverable #3: Provide expert technical input and written/oral feedback on draft design documents, including: (1) written content for the Design, including, but not limited to, a summary of relevant research related to national universities; and (2) review and quality assure content related to the design.
 - Individual Deliverable #4: Share research, guidance, and best practices in higher education training, policy, and leadership.
- Reviewed and advised on the *Akatoka Kakala Fetaikaki Ki He Teki Faiva Ola 'A E Faiako Ma'a Tonga School of Education Programmes Conceptual Framework*: Tonga National University, 2025.
- Co-authored *the 2019-2024 Education Sector Analysis (ESA) & 2025-2030 Education Sector Plan (ESP)*: Ministry of Education & Culture of Samoa, Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific and UNICEF, 2024-2025.
 - Wright, F.T., Schuster, T.A., **Levy, B.**, Imo, F., Pollard, C. M., & Siale, L. (2025). Samoa ESP 2019-2024 Review Report. Ministry of Education and Culture: Samoa & UNICEF: Samoa.
 - Wright, F.T., Schuster, T.A., **Levy, B.**, Imo, F., Pollard, C. M., & Siale, L. (2025). Samoa Education Sector Analysis (ESA) 2019-2024. Ministry of Education and Culture: Samoa & UNICEF: Samoa.
 - Wright, F.T., Schuster, T.A., **Levy, B.**, Imo, F., Pollard, C. M., & Siale, L. (2025). Samoa Education Sector Plan (ESP) 2025-2030. Ministry of Education

and Culture: Samoa & UNICEF: Samoa.

- Wright, T., Fa'avae, D.T.M., Levy, B., Packham, E., Virtue, K. A., & Watkins-Matavalea, D. (2026). An e-talanoa of the comparative and international education research field: Relational vā–decoloniality in Oceania. In t.d. Jules, F. Salajan, A. Becker, & B. Scherrer (Eds.), *The cultural turn in comparative and international education: Decolonizing the field in an era of post-humanist pluriverse thinking and racial capitalism* (pp. 99-119). Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-367920260000052014>.
- Levy, B., Ellis, S., Aporosa, A., & Allen, J.M.U. (2025). Reimagining doctoral supervision at the interface of diverse knowledge systems. In Y. Mori & B. Daniel (eds.) *International perspectives on academic development - understanding purposes, structures & contexts*. Springer Nature Publishing.
- Levy, B. (2025, November). *National Universities in Moana Oceania as Sites of Indigenous Futures and Epistemic Sovereignty* [Paper Presentation]. OCIES Annual Conference, Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand.
- Levy, B. (2025, 5-6 November). *Weaving Futures: Ethical Mobility and Relational Exchange through Global Partnerships*. International Student Exchange Program (ISEP) Annual Coordinator Workshop [Keynote Speaker]. Virtual.
- Levy, B. (2025, 14 October). *Educational research at the interface of diverse knowledge systems: Responsibilities as a non-Indigenous researcher and accomplice* [Invited Lecture]. Community of Phenomenal Practitioners Series, Ako Aotearoa.
- Nanau, G., Kalavite, T., Levy, B., & Rakuita, T. (2025, 08 October) *Reimagining Pacific Futures: Transformative Leadership, Regional Solidarity and the Power of Universities* [Invited Panellist], PacTNet Annual Panel, University of Otago.
- Levy, B. (2025, 07-10 July). *Higher education research at the interface of diverse knowledge systems in Moana Oceania* [Paper Presentation]. HERDSA Annual Conference, Perth, Australia.
- Levy, B. (2025, 12 May). *Nasonal Yunivesiti Blong Vanuatu/National University of Vanuatu/Université Nationale de Vanuatu* [Photograph] / *Navigating national priorities, regionalism and internationalisation in national universities of Moana Oceania* [Poster]. Images of Research Exhibition, University of Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand.

- **Levy, B.** (2024, 27 September). *Culturally responsible & contextually responsive research in the Pacific* [Paper Presentation]. Pacific Research Symposium, University of Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand.
- **Levy, B.** (2024, 16 August). *Research tok stori* [Invited Lecture]. National Parliament, Solomon Islands.
- **Wright, T. & Levy, B.** (2024, 23 July) *Wayfinding emerging education researcher positionalities in Oceania through collaborative sensemaking within the motutapu* [Paper Presentation], UNESCO XVIII World Congress of Comparative Education Societies, NY, U.S.A.
- **Levy, B. & Khasilova, D.** (2024, 06 February). *Democratising international higher education and empowering marginalised groups* [Invited Panellist], GlobalEd Academy Launch, Virtual.
- **Chan, P.W.K., Baice, T., Fonua, S., Diamond, Z., Ji, G., Levy, B., Zeng, S.A.** (2023) Scholarly responses to “Students’ experiences of open distance learning: A Samoan case study”. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 22(1), 125-133. <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/IEJ/article/view/17679>.
- **Wright, T. & Levy, B.** (2023, 15 November). *Critical co-constructed autoethnography of emerging CIE researchers’ positionalities in Moana Oceania* [Paper Presentation], Oceania Comparative & International Education Society Annual Conference, National University of Samoa, Samoa.
- **Levy, B.** (2023, 14 November) *Funding Postgraduate and Early Career Research* [Workshop], Oceania Comparative & International Education Society Annual Conference, National University of Samoa.
- Co-organised the 51st Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES) Conference: “Quality Education for Sustainable Futures” (2023), National University of Samoa.
- **Wright, T. & Levy, B.** (2023, 19 October). *Critical co-constructed autoethnography of comparative & international education emerging researcher positionality* [Paper Presentation], Waikato Research Symposium, University of Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand.
- **Levy, B.** (2023, 19 September). *Higher education internationalisation: Global tug-of-war* [Invited Lecture], Centre for Global Studies in Education, University of Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Proposed Timeline

Phase 1: Pre-Completion (2025)

During this phase, as I continue to finalise the thesis document, I will concurrently be positioning the research for maximum accessibility and ethical reciprocity. Throughout these final months, I have also been accepted to present at various international and regional conferences, have various publications pending release and have been contracted by Catalpa International and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) to share these research findings to inform their next seven-year investment strategy for tertiary education in Moana Oceania. Finally, I will also research possible funding opportunities to support this important dissemination work.

Phase 2: Return and Relational Dissemination (2026)

This phase is all about bringing the findings ‘home’ through dialogic and co-learning engagements. In collaboration with the five national universities, develop a local dissemination schedule and draft preliminary dissemination outputs. During this period, the primary focus is on the country-level dissemination visits. Potential activities could include:

- **Samoa:** hold sector-wide workshop via *talanoa*, based on the research findings, to develop context-responsive documentation; co-author article for the Journal of Samoan Studies; co-present at the annual Measina A Conference at the National University of Samoa.
- **Tonga:** deliver collaborative workshops; writing retreat with collaborators for an article submission to the *Tokoni Faiako* Tonga Journal.
- **Solomon Islands:** co-author policy briefs and institutional memos; collaborate with the Melanesian Spearhead Group to deliver a presentation at their annual Vice Chancellor of National Universities of Melanesia meeting.
- **Vanuatu:** Production of trilingual documents for institutional and other purposes determined, through *storian* workshops.
- **Fiji:** Through collaboration with colleagues at FNU, deliver staff workshops and hold relevant policy discussions with key stakeholders.

As mentioned earlier, a more detailed dissemination plan will be drafted with partners from National Universities. After each in-country visit, I will collaborate with my relational partners to collect qualitative feedback, testimonials, letters of support or *fono* reflections, where appropriate and available.

Phase 3: Scholarly and Global Dissemination (2026-2027)

The purpose of this phase is to further elevate the Moana Oceania scholarship and these research findings within scholarly and global platforms, through three media. The first is presentations at regional and international meetings, conferences, symposiums, etc. Where possible, this will be done in collaboration with colleagues at national universities. Secondly, I will build a low-maintenance digital, open-access resource hub that includes primary resources related to this research, as well as a space for all developed dissemination documents, easily accessible to interested parties. Finally, I will be developing a book proposal, in collaboration with colleagues across the region, informed by this research, but expanded and co-authored.

Phase 4: Sustaining Momentum and Learning (2027-2028)

I hope that the research will inform policy and planning following the previous two phases of dissemination. Maintaining and expanding the research implications will require ongoing negotiation, relationality and presence with collaborators. Should there be interest from collaborators, we could establish an informal community of practice platform to encourage idea exchange and sustained peer support. Additionally, I will continue to review the dissemination outputs with partners and adapt them as needed and in response to contextual changes. Monitoring focuses on reach (audiences engaged), use (how materials are re-shared or applied), and influence (policy/programmatic change). Through relational partners, we could aim to collect qualitative indicators, including, for example:

- Narratives of use or institutional change stories;
- Follow-up *talanoa/tok stori/storian* documentation
- Letters of support, testimonies, and co-authored outputs.

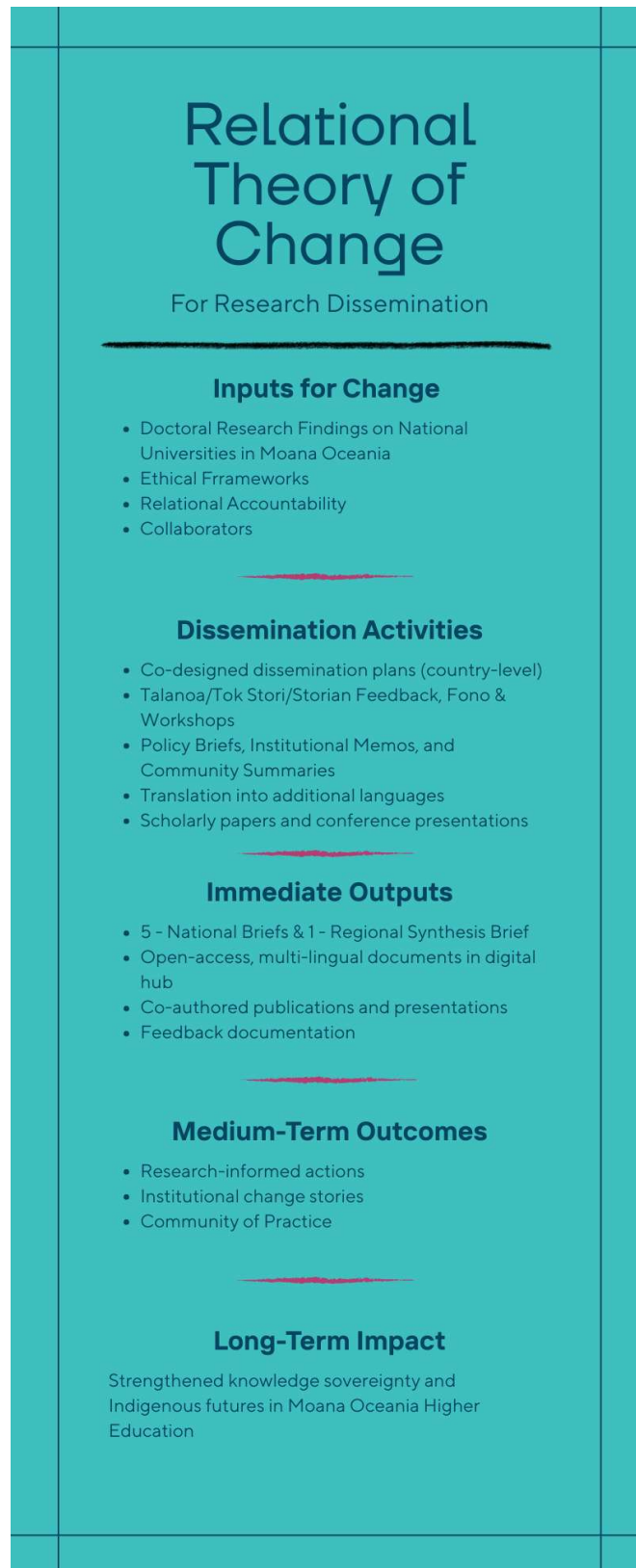
The goal of this monitoring is to demonstrate the impacts of the research findings and subsequent dissemination work.

Theory of Change

The following visualisation (Figure 15) has been created as another tool to understand and access the main principles, approaches and activities of this dissemination plan:

Figure 15.

Relational Theory of Change of the PhD Dissemination Strategy



Sustaining Momentum

Dissemination marks neither a terminus nor a handover; it is a threshold into further cycles of collaborative inquiry. To sustain momentum, I will:

- Propose a light-touch community of practice across participating institutions and agencies to share tools, brief templates, and stories of practice;
- Offer follow-up virtual *talanoa/tok stori/storian* three to six months after initial workshops to take stock of use and impact of the research; and,
- Curate a modest, low-maintenance digital resource hub (document repository with briefs, summaries, and slide decks) that institutions can draw from, adapt, and extend.

These steps are intentionally lightweight to respect capacity constraints while enabling continuity of relationship and learning (Knowles et al., 2021; Weir et al., 2024).

A Note on Voice and Positionality

As a researcher working within and alongside Moana Oceania institutions and peoples, I am implicated in the relationships that make this project possible. My commitment is to walk alongside carefully, adopting a stance of co-learning and humility (Flavell & Cunningham, 2023), and to write and speak in ways that keep the focus on institutional and community priorities rather than on the research as an end in itself. Reflexivity, here, is less a personal disclosure and more an ethical discipline, noticing where interpretations originate, their mobility, and the impacts they make (Berryman et al., 2013; Finlay, 2002).

Concluding Reflections

This chapter sets out a dissemination approach that is relational, situated, and action-centred, consistent with my ethical commitments and with Indigenous knowledge traditions in Moana Oceania. As I complete the thesis, dissemination is how the research returns to where it belongs, renews the relationships that sustained it, and continues its life in practice. The doctoral journey ends on paper, but persists in relationships and responsibilities that revisit findings with fresh insights, in the brief that seeds a small institutional change, or in the memo that helps a ministry re-frame a question. In these movements, dissemination is not an afterthought; it is the living

expression of relational accountability, and it is how this work will keep flowing through people, places and practices across the sea of islands.

Appendix A. Glossary of Key Terms

**Note #1: The following definitions have been presented or developed to inform the preceding research, and with a particular lens to Moana Oceania and Moana Oceania research spaces.*

***Note #2: Throughout this thesis, the terms Higher Education, Tertiary Education and Post-School Education and Training (PSET) are used in a broadly overlapping sense to denote structured learning beyond secondary schooling; where a specific national policy or framework employs one of these terms in a more delimited way, I follow the terminology used in that source.*

Axiology

In research, the researcher acknowledges the presence of biases and values within the research design and journey and discusses how they may influence their interpretation or the interpretation of the research participants (Creswell, 2013). Within this research, I have attempted to lead with a mindful and humble approach to the research spaces and in engagement with participants. Further exploration of this, as well as ethics, limitations, and the role of interpretation in this research, is discussed in Chapters 2, 3, 9, and 10.

Brain Drain

The emigration of highly educated and skilled individuals poses a significant challenge for most developing nations, particularly for smaller Pacific Island countries. Given their limited availability of skilled labour, the loss of even a few professionals can profoundly impede development initiatives and undermine vital institutions such as the public service. These departures frequently account for a large proportion of local or regional graduates, resulting in a squandering of limited public investment in education. Furthermore, this trend diminishes the effectiveness of donor-funded training, compelling governments and donors to reassess the deployment of already scarce resources (Narsey, 1992).

Colonial State

Colonial states are territories of the imperial base, separated geographically, that are predominantly governed and administered by the imperial government (Conrad, 2022; Johnson, 2011; Tecun & Ata Siu'ulua, 2024). Examples from Moana Oceania include French Polynesia, American Samoa, New Caledonia, Tokelau, Guam, Pitcairn, and more.

Decoloniality

Decoloniality, as described by Mignolo (2020), is not a standardised blueprint, but rather a way of living focused on "delinking" from the interconnectedness of modernity, rationality, and

colonial power. Since the goal is liberation from power structures not rooted in the mutual decisions of free individuals, no single, universal model or template for decolonial practice is possible.

Decolonisation

The process of removing or liberating an institution, system, structure or activity from the impacts of colonisation. This is an ongoing process, as colonisation continues to this day, but has taken different forms from the past. (Jackson, 2020; Kupferman, 2013; Mar, 2016; Smith, 1999; Smith et al., 2019). Decolonisation ‘involves rethinking and then action’ (Mercier, 2020, p.42).

Development Aid

Development aid, as defined by the OECD (n.d.), is funding provided by official donors to low- and middle-income nations. Its purpose is to bolster various sectors, including health, sanitation, education, and infrastructure. Primarily disbursed through grants or loans, this aid is a critical resource, accounting for over two-thirds of the external financing received by the least developed countries. The Moana Oceania region is among the most heavily dependent on development aid, particularly in the education sector. For more details on the landscape of development aid in the Moana Oceania, I invite you to visit the interactive map prepared by the Lowy Institute (2024): <https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org>. This resource allows you to filter by country, sector, source and other parameters.

Epistemology

According to Creswell (2013), research should be conducted in the natural environments where participants live and work. This is because knowledge is rooted in people's subjective experiences, making these contexts crucial for interpreting their stories. Within Moana Oceania, there is a growing focus and recognition of epistemologies that originate locally, rather than those sourced externally.

Equity (in Education)

Educational equity is achieved when success in the education system is no longer predictable by a learner's social or cultural background. This commitment means actively providing each student with the tailored support they need to fulfil their complete academic and social potential, resulting in consistently high outcomes for all. Achieving this requires a dedicated effort to challenge inequitable practices, critically examine bias, and cultivate learning environments, for both adults and children, that are inclusive and multicultural. Furthermore, it involves acknowledging, valuing, and nurturing the unique strengths, talents, and interests inherent in every individual.

Eurocentrism

The knowledge system of modernity and coloniality, as described by Quijano & Ennis (2000) and cited by Escobar (2007), is presented as universally valid. This assertion of universality is achieved by merging abstract concepts, claimed to be universal, with Europe's unique historical role as a global power.

Globalisation

Globalisation refers to the worldwide increase in the interconnection of economies, cultures, and populations, facilitated by growing cross-border flows of trade, technology, investment, migration, and information. Although countries have developed these cross-border ties over many centuries, the term became widespread in the early 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, as these intensifying partnerships began to visibly and profoundly shape daily life.

Global North

This term describes a dynamic of global asymmetry during a specific period in global relations. When referencing the Global North, it is not geographically defined; instead, it refers to a grouping of nations that are the majority beneficiaries of global capitalism and are both economically and politically dominant. It is widely used not only by scholars but also by multilateral organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme in classifying nations based on the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP, 2007). There is much debate as to whether the term can be a unifying force for the Global South, or another example of 'othering' or arbitrary binary division (Hart, 2010; Hemi & Aporosa, 2021; Marginson & Xu, 2023; Maringe, 2022; Matapo, 2021a; Nabobo-Baba, 2004; Sanga, 2004; Thaman, 2006; Vaughn & Ambo, 2022).

Global South

As the term opposite of the Global North, the Global South refers to nations and peoples dominated by global neoliberalism and capitalism. Some researchers have embraced this terminology as an empowering, even unifying, term for the most marginalised by the hegemonic forces of the Global North, enabling them to resist and counter those forces collectively. Out of this sentiment was born Southern Theory, thereby decentring knowledge dominance from the Global North and elevating and centring the knowledges of the Global South. Critiques that challenge the binary aspect of these terms focus on economic divisions within nations of the Global South (e.g., the rich-poor divide within a country). Additionally,

due to the directional references in the name, there can also be lack of clarity as to where geographically distinctions lie between the Global North and the Global South, particularly as these global economic distinctions are dynamic (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Beine et al., 2008; Docquier et al., 2007; Doulatram, 2016; Dumont et al., 2007; Hoskins & Jones, 2022; Liki, 2001; Maringe, 2022; Shahjahan et al., 2017; Smith, 1999; Teferra, 2020a; Thaman, 2006; Vaughn & Ambo, 2022).

Higher Education Indigenisation

This transformative process aims to do more than acknowledge, but to integrate Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies into the strategies, policies, structures and organisational cultures in higher education. It calls for greater inclusion of Indigenous decision-making and positionality throughout the institution. Additionally, it actively partners with Indigenous communities and the places in which it is situated. Critiques of higher education indigenisation worry that working to reshape institutions developed through colonial beginnings may create new potential injustices for Indigenous peoples and impact their knowledges and communities in other ways. (Kickett et al., 2023; Sumida Huaman et al., 2019; Sumida Huaman & Braboy, 2017; Minthorn & Chávez, 2015)

Higher Education Internationalisation

The most cited definition of higher education internationalisation is by Knight (2004), who describes the phenomenon as “the process of integrating international, intercultural and global dimensions into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (p. 11). Subsequently, de Wit and Hunter (2015) revised the definition with added language to Knight’s, as follows (additions bolded and italicised): “the *intentional* process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, *in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society.*” (p.3) Heleta & Chasi (2023) and others have long critiqued the internationalisation models of the Global North and have offered perspectives from South Africa that frame the conversation through a decolonial lens. In this new definition, “Internationalisation of higher education is a critical and comparative process of the study of the world and its complexities, past and present inequalities and injustices, and possibilities for a more equitable and just future for all. Through teaching, learning, research and engagement, internationalisation fosters epistemic plurality and integrates critical, anti-racist and anti-hegemonic learning about the world from diverse global

perspectives to enhance the quality and relevance of education.” (Heleta & Chasi, 2023, pp. 269-270)...they call on us to confront the system itself in order to centre equity and counter the prevailing dominance of the Global North in how we both position the research of higher education internationalisation as well as our academic interventional practices. The definition proposes a shift in perspective, born of the South African experience, that offers us an opportunity to nurture greater reflexivity in our scholar-practitioner selves and engage in more mindful, equitable, and transformative internationalisation research and practice.

Indigenous Knowledges

Indigenous knowledge represents the distinctive, place-based understanding cultivated by communities with deep, enduring ties to their local environments. It is a system sustained through generations, typically by oral and communal traditions. Shaped by the daily lives of Indigenous women and men within their specific territories, this knowledge encompasses cultural systems and guides practical decision-making in vital areas such as agriculture, health, education, and the stewardship of ecosystems (Agarwal, 1995; Grenier, 1998; UNESCO, 2024).

Indigenous Peoples

The term ‘Indigenous peoples’ is a modern legal and political concept that emerged in the 1970s, serving to link the struggles of colonised communities globally (Smith, 1999). These groups are defined by self-identification as Indigenous, historical continuity with pre-colonial societies, deep ties to their lands and waters, and the maintenance of distinct social, political, cultural, and spiritual systems. Although they are generally non-dominant within the states that govern them, they actively defend their rights to land, language, knowledge systems, and self-determined development (UN, 2007). However, the term's utility is not without controversy, as it risks homogenising the diverse identities and self-descriptions used by different peoples (Smith, 1999; Stewart, 2018).

Within Moana Oceania, Indigenous peoples share millennia-old connections through oceans, lands, knowledge, and cultural practices (Nabobo-Baba, 2004). Regional discussions about Indigeneity, such as in Tonga, reveal that the experience of colonisation and coloniality is not uniform; Indigenous-colonial entanglements can persist even in the absence of a traditional colonial state (Tecun & Ata Siu’ulua, 2024). Drawing on decolonial scholarship, Indigeneity in Moana Oceania can be understood as a relational, place-based framework rooted in ancestral lifeways, communal obligations, and a non-anthropocentric relationship with the land and sea. This paradigm challenges modern, Western, and capitalist ideas of 'civilisation' while also

necessitating a critical examination of pre-colonial power structures and hierarchies (Figuerola-Helland & Raghu, 2017).

Internationalisation Partnerships (Universities)

A university internationalisation partnership is a relationship between institutions or organisations, formed for broad or specific purposes such as student or staff exchange, research, curriculum projects, or other joint activities. These partnerships range from informal arrangements to formalised Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), and, where resources are committed, to legally binding contracts. They often originate from personal connections between academics and are sometimes used as indicators of internationalisation performance. (Bertot, 2020; Bradley, 2017; Chasi, 2022; George Mwangi, 2017; Gray et al., 2022; Hagenmeier, 2015; Hanada, 2021; Helms, 2015; Koehn, 2012; Koehn & Obama, 2014; Teferra, 2016)

Kakala

In Tongan, *kakala* means ‘fragrant flowers’, but it also refers to a rich cultural practice with its own vocabulary. Thaman (1992) first used *kakala* as a metaphor for curriculum, with three stages: *toli* (selecting what is needed with skill and knowledge), *tui* (weaving or constructing the garland in a context-specific way), and *luva* (gifting the garland as an act of respect and love). This framework was later expanded to six stages by adding *teu* (planning and preparation) at the beginning, and *malie* (shared understanding/assessment) and *mafana* (impact/evaluation) at the end (Johansson-Fua, 2014; Johansson-Fua et al., 2007; Thaman, 2006).

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) establishes the intent of two institutions to collaborate, setting out shared aims and intentions without creating a legally binding agreement or committing to specific activities. Since it formalises the relationship, careful consideration must be given to the suitability and quality of the partner institution to ensure proper alignment with the planned collaboration.

Moana Oceania

For this research, the term Moana Oceania is used to describe the Island nations of the region, with Papua New Guinea to the West, the Northern Marianas Islands to the North, Rapa Nui to the east, and the Pitcairn Islands to the South. Other terms utilised include Pacific, Oceania, the Blue Continent, and the sub-regions of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. The choice to

use Moana Oceania is to privilege the Indigenous contexts of the region intentionally and avoid utilising the names given to the region and subregions because of colonisation, as referred to by *Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu* Professor ‘Ōkunitino Māhina as ‘imposed terminologies’ (Chitham et al., 2019). In addition, the term Moana Oceania is more inclusive of all subregions, whereas other terms used today often privilege Polynesia over the others when discussing cultures and contexts (Lagi-Maama Academy & Consultancy, 2019). Co-editors of the book *Crafting Aotearoa* (Chitham et al., 2019) describe their choice to use the terminology ‘Moana Oceania’ as follows:

“The name ‘Pacific’ was given to this region by a Portuguese navigator and explorer in 1521. Ferdinand Magellan’s ‘Mar Pacifico’ - the peaceful sea - emphasises a narrow perception of the peoples and places of Moana Oceania as peaceful, tranquil, passive, which is not how [I]ndigenous peoples from this region see themselves. Pacific has become Pasifika, Pasefika or Pasifiki, but these transliterations are derived from the same root. Moana means Ocean in the Māori language and in other island nations such as the Cook Islands, Hawai’i, Sāmoa and Tonga. While it can never be truly inclusive because of the diversity of languages and cultures of the Moana Oceania peoples, it has meaning and relevance to this place.

Oceania is another foreign name that was first used in the early nineteenth century. Today, it is a popular alternative for the Pacific because it suggests a sea of islands connected, rather than isolated islands in a far sea. It is a name that is more meaningful to island nations that do not have the word moana in their languages. Together, Moana Oceania empowers and privileges [I]ndigenous perspectives.”

Motutapu

A direct translation from many languages of Polynesian³⁸ origin is ‘sacred island’ (*Motu* = island, *tapu* - sacred). However, in the context of this research, I refer to the work of Dr Seu’ula Johansson-Fua (2020), in which she utilises this concept as a metaphor for the relational space, a space she describes as in the middle and sacred, where researchers and practitioners come together to negotiate their collaborations. It is a space where collaborators can begin to build or strengthen their *vā* over time and ‘give attention to the emerging lines of interconnectedness and interdependence in their relationships’ (Johansson-Fua, 2020, p.43).

³⁸ There are 38 Polynesian languages; the most commonly spoken languages classified linguistically as Polynesian are: Tahitian, Samoan, Tonga, Māori and Hawaiian.

National Education Plan

Goes a step further than the National Education Policy and Strategy and outlines specific targets and activities, a timeline, a budget, and a MERL framework.

National Education Policy

Sets out the national priorities and sector and sub-sector goals for education, generally in response to specifically identified challenges or regional or internationally identified focus areas.

National Education Strategy

Articulates how national education priorities and sector/sub-sector goals will be realised.

National University

A national university is typically a state-established or state-run institution. However, it can often operate with a degree of independence, not subject to direct government control.

Neoliberalism

The global policy paradigm known as neoliberalism champions free markets, robust private property rights, minimal government intervention, and individual freedom. While often presented as an optimal societal structure, this framework faces criticism for primarily serving the interests of multinational corporations, the financial industry, and influential state and international bodies. Neoliberal reforms have been connected to growing disparities both within and across nations, the erosion of collective rights and egalitarian principles, and a rise in disempowerment and declining well-being (Carlquist & Phelps, 2014).

Ontology

Ontology, in the context of qualitative research, relates to assumptions about reality and existence. It typically acknowledges that multiple realities co-exist, and the research aims to capture these diverse perspectives by presenting participants' accounts and various forms of evidence (Creswell, 2013). In this research, I attempted to privilege research methods that are relevant and responsive to each research context. Additionally, utilising a primarily dialogic form of 'data collection' provided greater space for diverse perspectives, as well as for collaborative sensemaking to conduct case study analysis through active participation with research participants, further validating and authenticating diverse narratives and understandings.

Policy Borrowing

To take a policy or practice considered valuable in one context and transfer or adapt it for use in another national context (Phillips, 2014). Oftentimes, the home country is 'influenced' by international aid organisations, governments, country nationals educated overseas, and others. This influence can be received with varied levels of acceptance or resistance. The complications with policy borrowing are most commonly delocalisation/decontextualisation, whereas the policy itself cannot be effectively implemented in the country where it is borrowed. (Burdett & O'Donnell, 2016; Phillips, 2014; Philips & Ochs, 2003, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012)

PSET

Post-school education and training (PSET) encompasses all structured learning that occurs after an individual completes their primary schooling. This broad category includes further and continuing education offered through various institutions, such as universities, vocational and technical colleges, workplace-based training programs, and adult and community education initiatives.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a key research principle that acknowledges the dynamic interplay between researchers and participants. It counters the idea that researchers can uncover neutral facts, asserting instead that the research context both influences and is influenced by the researcher. This perspective views research as a fundamentally human and social endeavour, shaped by personal, institutional, and political factors that impact how studies are designed, implemented, and utilised. By questioning claims of objectivity, reflexivity highlights that knowledge production is always situated within existing discourses, lived experiences, societal interests, and power structures. Consequently, reflexivity is vital for uncovering the political dimensions of fieldwork and knowledge production, particularly in collaborations between academics and practitioners (Orr & Bennett, 2009).

Regionalism (Moana Oceania)

The collective efforts of Pacific Island countries and territories characterise regionalism in Moana Oceania. It involves cooperation, the establishment of common institutions, and the fostering of a shared identity and purpose within a specific geographical area. In the Pacific, this collaboration addresses critical issues such as climate change, decolonisation, ocean governance, and education. This regional approach is deeply rooted in shared histories and

cultures, and in the understanding that the Pacific is an interconnected space rather than simply a collection of isolated islands.

Relationality

In cultures across the Moana Oceania, relationality is a common and defining characteristic. Within these contexts, I would describe it as the construction of a purposeful, collective identity, where one's individuality is honoured within the space and strengthened through connection with others. It is a space that requires ongoing nurturing and protection. Additionally, within the Moana Oceania contexts, this relational space includes connections to the environment and spiritual spaces. Within research spaces in Moana Oceania, there is an obligation to engage with relationality in all aspects of the research practice, to honour and care for it, and to sustain it over time. (Coxon et al., 2020; Johansson-Fua et al., 2020; Sanga et al., 2018; Spratt & Coxon, 2020; Tu'imana, 2022; Wildcat & Voth, 2023)

Researcher Positionality

A researcher's positionality is intrinsically linked to their onto-epistemological commitments, their fundamental assumptions about reality and knowledge (Ryan, 2015). These commitments are part of a wider worldview (Holmes, 2020), which is itself shaped by the researcher's intersecting identities (Lee et al., 2018). This positioning significantly influences both how the researcher perceives participants and how participants perceive the researcher. Consequently, these foundational assumptions permeate every stage of the research process, including the crucial steps of analysis and interpretation (Rowe, 2014). To address this, researchers must engage in reflexivity. This practice makes the researcher's own subjectivity visible, allowing them to interrogate their social, political, and cultural positioning and consider how it shapes the development and analysis of knowledge (Chin et al., 2022; Cobb & Franken, 2017; Finlay, 2002).

Self-Determination (Indigenous)

Indigenous self-determination is a collective right rather than an individual one. It is understood as the ability for Indigenous peoples to determine their own political/governance, economic, social and cultural systems and development. National governments do not widely guarantee this collective right, although it is mentioned by some and included in international documents (e.g., the United Nations). (Hindley et al., 2020; Kickett et al., 2023; Smith, 1999; Smith & Munshi, 2023)

Sensemaking (Collaborative)

An integrated manner to synthesise and draw understanding which encompasses ‘knowing-seeing-feeling-doing-being’ (Dyck et al., 2022, p. 37). Sometimes also referred to as meaning-making, and often someone is selected to deliver sensemaking at the end of an extended discussion or presentation period. Collaborative sensemaking as a research analytical tool is relatively new within academic scholarship. As stated by Dyck et al. (2022, p.37), “When cared for, the *vā* as a space of interconnection and relational sense-making can lead to feelings and experiences of *mana* (inspiration, empowerment).”

Settler-Colonial

Settler-colonial states are nations in which the foreign colonial settlers remained after independence from the colonial state, and colonial systems and legacies persist. (Barolsky, 2023; Maddison & Strakosch, 2019; Tecun & Ata Siu’ulua, 2024). Examples include Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, Canada, and more.

Southern Theory

Southern theory is a form of social theorising originating from the Global South, though its scope of analysis extends beyond that region. The term highlights the geopolitics of knowledge by focusing on concepts that emerged either under colonial rule or in post-colonial, peripheral settings (Connell, 2024).

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In September 2015, at the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, member states endorsed a new global development framework, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. This agenda positions sustainable development as a guiding principle that seeks to safeguard the “well-being of both people and planet” (UNESCO, 2016). Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, which preceded the SDGs and primarily targeted low-income countries, Agenda 2030 is explicitly worldwide. It offers a shared vision for a more just world grounded in cooperation and interdependence, articulated through 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Education is explicitly addressed in Goal 4, the only goal dedicated to universal education, which commits countries to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Owens, 2017, pp. 414-415).

Transnational Education (TNE)

Education that spans national borders, known as transnational education (TNE), involves providing educational programmes, qualifications, or institutions to learners in a country other

than the one where the awarding institution is located. TNE encompasses various models, including offshore campuses, joint or dual degree arrangements, distance and online learning options, and franchised programmes delivered by partner institutions located internationally.

TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training)

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) encompasses a wide array of educational, training, and skills development activities focused on diverse occupational areas, production, services, and livelihood pursuits. Its core purpose is to equip individuals, communities, organisations, and businesses with the necessary competencies to support employment and lifelong learning. By doing so, TVET contributes to more inclusive and sustainable economic development, social justice, and environmental stewardship (UNESCO, 2023a). In practice, TVET often involves programmes designed primarily to prepare learners for direct entry into specific trades and occupations (UNESCO, 2014). This commitment to TVET is reflected explicitly in targets 4.3 (access), 4.4 (relevance), and 4.5 (gender equality) of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) (UNESCO, 2023a).

Vā

An interconnected and relational space between humans and the natural world, *vā* is a cultural characteristic and value in Tonga, Samoa, Tuvalu, and Tokelau. This interconnected, relational space must be nurtured on an ongoing basis and any tensions addressed, to establish balance in society and its organisations. (Ka’ili, 2017; Nokise, 2017; Suaalii-Sauni, 2017)

Vanua

Vanua is an *iTaukei* (Indigenous Fijian) way of seeing and being with the world, informed by knowledge traditions, lived realities, cultural expressions and core values. Based on the work of Nabobo-Baba (2008), it has also been conceived as an approach to research that centres on how *iTaukei* (with possible applicability to other Indigenous peoples) engage with research and the production of knowledge, recognising the entanglements to the dynamics of history and power relations.

Wansolwara

The term *Wansolwara*, meaning “one salt water” in Solomon Islands *Pidgin*, serves as a powerful metaphor for unity: a singular ocean connecting diverse peoples in a shared voice. This concept is already in use, for instance, at the University of the South Pacific, where students have named their newspaper *Wansolwara* to embody a collective Pacific identity.

Grounded in a Pacific worldview, the metaphor allows individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds to interpret and engage with the idea of togetherness personally. Furthermore, because it originates from a Pidgin term shaped by Melanesian experiences of colonialism, *wansolwara* underscores the linguistic links between Melanesian communities—via languages such as Solomon Islands Pidgin, Vanuatu Bislama, and Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin—and their connection to the broader world (Johansson-Fua, 2022).

Appendix B. Research Ethics

Ethics applied through a culturally relevant lens and in compliance with institutional, governmental, and community standards were central to the design, implementation, analysis, and dissemination. The following sections outline the ethical processes required for this research to be approved, as well as additional characteristics that further elevate an ethical approach throughout the research journey and participant engagement. A total of 14 individual ethics applications and approvals were received across the five research countries and at my home institution, the University of Waikato.

The University of Waikato

The study design was reviewed by the Ethics Committee at the Division of Education, the University of Waikato (UoW), prior to commencing fieldwork, receiving approval (FEDU022/23) in early July 2023. An amendment was added to the UoW Ethics approval in April 2024 following my securing of a role with the University of the South Pacific's Institute of Education as the Coordinator and Tutor for the Professional Certificate in Educational Policy and Planning (PCEPP) Programme.

Research (Fieldwork) Sites

Prior to commencing the research, I engaged in discussions with each institution's research office to seek any necessary approvals, consult on the research and to complete their ethics review process(es). Details on each institution's process can be found at the links below:

- **National University of Samoa (NUS):** The University Research and Ethics Committee (UREC) is the institutional body that establishes research-oriented policies and procedures: <https://nus.edu.ws/nus-research-and-publications/>. Before securing a Research Visa through the Samoa Immigration Office, you must submit a research ethics application and receive approval from NUS-UREC. (*Research Ethics Approved: 26 September 2023*)
- **Tonga National University (TNU):** <https://tnu.edu.to/>; there was no defined process at the time this research was presented to TNU. Instead, I submitted an adapted version of the research ethics application submitted to NUS and sent it to the interim Vice

Chancellor of TNU. She then reviewed and provided approval with a Letter of Support (*Research Ethics Approved: 25 March 2024*)

- **Solomon Islands National University (SINU):** The Office of Research and Postgraduate Studies (ORPS) is the institutional department responsible for establishing research-oriented policies and overseeing requests for research ethics approvals: <https://www.sinu.edu.sb/executive-governance/vice-chancellor/pro-vice-chancellor-academic/office-of-research-and-postgraduate-studies/>. Upon submission of the application requirements, the ORPS committee met to review and determine their decision. (*Research Ethics Approved: 08 July 2024*)
- **National University of Vanuatu (NUV):** <https://www.univ.edu.vu/en/>; there was no defined process at the time this research was presented to NUV. Instead, I submitted an adapted version of the research ethics application submitted to SINU-ORPS and sent it to the Deputy Vice Chancellor of NUV. He then reviewed and provided me with a Letter of Support (*Research Ethics Approved: 16 July 2024*)
- **Fiji National University (FNU):** FNU has a designated Research Office responsible for establishing research-oriented policies, procedures and reviewing research ethics applications: <https://www.fnu.ac.fj/research/research-policies/>. Upon submission of the complete FNU Research Ethics application, it was reviewed by the FNU Human Research Ethics Committee, a decision was presented, and a Letter of Approved Support was delivered. (*Research Ethics Approved: 09 July 2024*)

In addition to Ethics approval, I fulfilled immigration requirements for each country as follows:

- **Samoa:**
 - Ministry of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Immigration Division: <https://mpmc.gov.ws/divisions/immigration/permits-2/>. The Government of Samoa required the submission of an application, the associated fee, and supporting documentation for a Temporary Resident Permit for academic research. (*Approved: 16 November 2023*)
- **Tonga:**
 - Prime Minister's Office: <https://pmo.gov.to/index.php/tonga-government-research-permit-requirements/>. The Government of Tonga required submission of an application, associated fees and supporting documentation to be considered for a Research Permit. (*Approved: 27 March 2024*)
- **Solomon Islands:**

- Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD), Research Committee: <https://www.mehrd.gov.sb/101-uncategorised/202-procedures-for-applying-for-a-research-permit>. The MEHRD is the responsible government agency for reviewing and approving research in the Solomon Islands. Upon submission of an application, associated fees, and supporting documentation, they provided governmental research approval. (*Approved: 08 July 2024*)
- **Vanuatu:**
 - Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (VKS) & Vanuatu National Kaljoral Kaonsel (VNKK): <https://vanuatumculturalcentre.gov.vu/index.php/research/research-permits/research-policy>. Originally designated as the agency responsible for oversight and approval of research in Vanuatu, VKS received the first application after NUV approval. A change in immigration policy re-directing the process to another government agency. However, VKS remained committed to supporting and facilitating this research and went so far as to hand-deliver documents to the Department of Foreign Affairs. (*Approved: 07 August 2024*)
 - Vanuatu Department of Foreign Affairs. Upon review and approval of the research proposal, the DFA provided a letter of support for the Department of Immigration to issue the Research Visa. Additionally, in the letter, they requested a waiver of visa fees, stating the importance of this research to the country. (*Approved: 13 August 2024*)
 - Vanuatu Department of Immigration & Passport Services: <https://immigration.gov.vu/specialist/>. All required documentation was submitted via an online portal, and approval was received within approximately one week. (*Approved: 19 August 2024*)

**Note: the requirements for a research permit were updated. They were moved to a different responsible agency during my application period, so there were more applications and requirements than would normally be the case.*
- **Fiji:**
 - Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts: https://www.education.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Policy_on_Research.pdf. The Ministry must also approve any research conducted in the country's education sector. Therefore, a research proposal was submitted, the fees paid, and the supporting documents included. (*Approved: 30 July 2024*)

- Immigration Department: <https://www.immigration.gov.fj/research-permit/>. According to Fiji Immigration, “Research Permit is granted to a person to undertake research for the benefit of local universities/institutions or as a part of his/her professional or educational requirement.” Upon submission of the application, payment of relevant fees and inclusion of all supporting documentation, a review was undertaken. However, due to significant delays within the department and numerous follow-ups, the visa was significantly delayed in delivery. (*Approved: August 2024*)

Personal Ethics Statement

An iteration of the following statement was included in each institutional or government ethics application submitted:

“I hereby confirm my willingness to abide by the ethical requirements of the government of [Country Name] and all institutions in which this research will engage, and to uphold the highest duty of care with all participants. Additionally, I confirm that upon completion of the research, I will provide a copy of the full thesis at no charge to the [Country Name] Ministry of Education.”

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