

Transformative leadership, regional solidarity, and the role of universities in a changing world

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Summary

At the University of Otago's Annual Pacific Lecture for 2025, Solomon Islands National University Vice Chancellor, Professor Transform Aqorau, delivered a bold address about the importance of regional solidarity and cooperation, leadership centred on service and dignity, sustainable development for and by Pacific peoples, and recognising the vital role universities play in shaping these. These themes were then deliberated during a subsequent Public Panel. Here, we collate and present individual responses from the panellists. This is followed by a reflective discussion about the growing number of national universities and the changing socio-economic and political landscape of tertiary education in Oceania. Echoing Aqorau's message of self-belief and finding strength in regional solidarity, we encourage Pacific university leaders and educators to strive for excellence by benchmarking first from within, and to work together to meet the growing educational and increasingly complex developmental needs of the Blue Pacific Continent.

Keywords: Pacific Thought Network (PacTNet); Pacific Lecture; panel; leadership; development; universities

Introduction

On 19 June 2025, Professor Transform Aqorau, Vice-Chancellor, Solomon Islands National University (SINU), delivered the third Annual Pacific Lecture¹ at Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka | University of Otago. The lecture, entitled “Reimagining Pacific futures: Transformative leadership, regional solidarity, and the role of universities in a changing world”, invited the audience to reimagine a Pacific future built on transformative leadership and regional solidarity, and one where universities played a key role in achieving these aspirations.

As is the practice, a panel was convened thereafter to reflect on the annual lecture. The panel discussion, comprising Gordan Nanau, Telesia Kalavite and Ben Levy, took place in October 2025. This paper collates and builds on the panellists' thoughts on Aqorau's lecture. It is presented in the order of the two sets of questions asked of the panellists. The first focused on tradition, authentic leadership, and the role Pacific universities play in shaping meaningful futures for Pacific peoples. The second dwelled on rights-based and inclusive leadership in the Pacific. The panellists' responses are followed by a discussion about the narrative of 'reimagining Pacific futures'. This future, we argue, calls on Pacific university leaders and educators, particularly in the context of growing national universities, to not lose sight of the community-building spirit of regional institutions such as the University of the South Pacific (USP).

1 The Annual Pacific Lecture is a key activity of the Pacific Thought Network (PacTNet), now Centre for Pacific Thought (CPacT). CPacT is a University of Otago-funded flagship research centre that fosters interdisciplinary Pacific conversations and research. Lecture recording: <https://youtu.be/oS1bfj5Cqck?si=zV9ZnilVRXCTCo-x>.

Tradition, authentic leadership, and the role of regional universities

STATEMENT: *Professor Transform Aqorau talked about the need to embed leadership back into our own Pacific or Oceanic cultures. He pointed out that authentic leadership is ‘not about power and prestige but about responsibility and service’ and that one earns legitimacy only by serving our people.*

QUESTION: *Can you extrapolate on Professor Aqorau’s statement by speaking about the role that universities in our region can play to contribute to a development discourse that takes into account the importance of culture and tradition in the region?*

NANAU: Three sources of influence and legitimacy in the Pacific include the state, church, and culture (Sanga et. al., 2023). While the church is a modern institution, its values are now entrenched in contemporary Pacific societies. Pacific universities must recognise and embed merits of both modern introduced knowledge systems, and those of indigenous communities in their research, teaching, and knowledge transfer. Development discourse must therefore appreciate this hybrid context and liminality between Pacific sources of legitimacy. Students graduating from Pacific universities must be able to discern when a position taken by a Pacific leader is a cultural position, a legal position or a religious position.

KALAVITE: Universities in the Pacific should be more solemn in ways that are Pacific in essence in terms of worldviews, education, development and leadership. They should resist the strong wave of globalisation with its wealth, power, fame and self-interest. These global obsessions drive challenges like climate change and related issues in the Pacific region. Fast-tracked by internet access and social media, we are beginning to join others who have forgotten their humanity and turned against each other instead of working reciprocally. The role of universities in the Pacific region, then, is to bridge what we know and how we live, to turn knowledge into noble practice.

LEVY: Aqorau challenges universities in Oceania to centre culture and responsibility. As their leadership serves not only their students, they should strive to become “incubators of the future” for their local communities, nations and *wansolwara* region (Aqorau, 2025, p. 7). Universities in Oceania are uniquely positioned to elevate Indigenous knowledge within curricula, Indigenous research methodologies and ensure governance, policy and practice value ancestral stewardship alongside imported frameworks (Thaman, 2019; Nabobo-Baba, 2006). By embedding ethics and service-oriented leadership training, universities can form leaders accountable to their people, rather than external agendas (Aqorau, 2025; Sanga et al, 2021). They can also act as conveners of dialogue grounded in Oceanic traditions and build regional solidarity through partnerships. In doing so, universities become spaces that cultivate culturally-rooted, community-minded leaders dedicated to collective wellbeing across the region (Johansson-Fua, 2020, 2022).

QUESTION: *How will the shift that Professor Aqorau is referring to, help in reimagining Pacific futures and regional solidarity that will ensure ‘real’ and meaningful development for our people?*

NANAU: Solidarity hinges on strong relationships with individuals, communities and states trusting each other. Our communities thrive on respect, reverence and reciprocal livelihoods (Nanau, 2020). With several Pacific states now establishing their own national universities, has enough trust been built to allow newly established institutions to focus on undergraduate programmes and established, properly equipped ones to concentrate on research programmes? Decolonising and reimagining Pacific knowledge will eventuate when Pacific students, researchers and scholars publish and influence fundamental debates (see Narokobi, 1983). It is not a level academic field, but Pacific research and discourses must feature people and their values at the centre of development thinking.

KALAVITE: Aqorau referred to a more than two-decades-old shift that was led by the late Professor Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) and other academics worldwide. Turning this knowledge into noble practice is gradually trekking along to help in reimagining Pacific futures and regional solidarity ensuring real and meaningful development for Pacific peoples. There are excellent developments in different sectors of countries in the Pacific. Some examples from the region include the current New Zealand Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030 (Ministry of Education, 2020), and individual New Zealand universities' Pacific Strategic Frameworks. There are also the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) 2050 Strategy for Blue Pacific Continent (Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, 2022), and the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) 2018-2030 (Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, 2018). Hence, there is always hope if we all stand in solidarity.

LEVY: Shifting from prestige to service-based leadership reclaims agency by grounding development in Indigenous priorities rather than external agendas (Sanga & Reynolds, 2018, 2020; Johannson-Fua, 2022). It anchors futures in dignity, reciprocity, and ecological stewardship, ensuring projects align with cultural resilience and intergenerational responsibility (Meo-Sewabu et al., 2017; Sanga, 2017). This approach also deepens regional solidarity. Leaders who serve their people recognise shared regional challenges and act collectively, as seen in recent ocean diplomacy work (Kabutaulaka, 2021; Carter et al., 2025). Across the region, culturally rooted models of governance show how nations can be locally grounded, yet regionally connected (Johannson-Fua, 2020, 2022; Sanga & Reynolds, 2020). This mindset enables Pacific peoples to imagine expansive, resilient futures shaped by their own values and aspirations (Nabobo-Baba, 2008, Vaii & Casimira, 2017; Kabutaulaka, 2021; Wada, 2024).

Rights-based and inclusive leadership

STATEMENT: *Professor Aqorau stated about this theme that ‘In practical terms, this means placing human dignity and community rights at the heart of development. It means leaders must protect the rights of all, from indigenous landowners to marginalised groups ensuring that development is something done by and for the Pacific people – not to us.’*

QUESTION: *Rights-based and inclusive leadership presumes the existence of legal standards that act as guardrails to a new development pathway. Can you respond broadly to the statement above given your own personal experiences with the dynamics of development in the region?*

NANAU: Rights-based and inclusive leadership must start from the assertion that the state has very limited presence in many Pacific countries. Leadership is not about individuals sitting in various positions under formal structures but rather relational dynamics that get things done or effect change in communities. A study in the Solomon Islands revealed that real leaders wear and use different “leadership hats” in their communities and use them to effect positive change (McCloughlin, et. al., 2023). How have countries that accommodated aspects of their cultural values and traditions (e.g. matai system) into the modern structures of the state fared? What can we learn from them?

KALAVITE: Education is a legal human right, a commitment from everyone to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education to promote lifelong learning opportunities (United Nation Sustainable Development Goals 4, 2025). The investment in education is to widen access, reduce inequalities, improve quality, and increase the number of better-educated and skilled human resources needed for development. Universities are key for developmental achievements in modernization, economic prosperity, political stability, and social cohesiveness. In contemporary Pacific societies, the unwritten rules or laws are just as important as the written ones. The unwritten Pacific worldviews and cultures are significant in inclusive leadership with values of truth, transparency and trust.

LEVY: Aqorau’s call for rights-based leadership reflects what I have witnessed across the region (Aqorau, 2025). Legal standards matter, but they must work alongside customary systems to protect dignity. Pacific leaders and scholars stress that human rights principles and kastom share core values of respect, dignity and care, and must be held in balance, rather than set against each other. In places where land is overwhelmingly customary, rights and development are inseparable from cultural authority, because customary tenure is both numerically dominant and “fundamentally connected to the social, spiritual, political and economic life” of Pacific peoples, and embedded in Indigenous frameworks (Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Vunibola & Scheyvens, 2019). Universities help train leaders who can navigate these dual systems, ensuring development empowers rather than marginalises communities (Aqorau, 2025; Nabob-Baba, 2008; Pilisi et al., 2025). Inclusive leadership also widens decision-making to women, youth, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ groups through culturally grounded practices like talanoa, tok stori and storian (Cammock et al, 2021; Walker, 2013; Vaiutoletti, 2006). When leaders act ethically and uphold rights in both law and kastom, development becomes genuinely just (Aqorau, 2025).

Discussion

The panellists' responses echo Aqorau's emphasis about the importance of regional solidarity, dignified leadership and sustainable development for and by Pacific peoples. These they believe can be largely achieved via universities whether national or regional, provided that they act as a collective and recognise the merits of both modern introduced and indigenous knowledge systems.

USP, established in 1968, has been an archetype of Pacific regional intergovernmental cooperation (Groves, 2020). Overtime, an increasing number of national universities have arisen in the Pacific, some of the newest being the Tongan National University (TNU) established in 2023, National University of Vanuatu (NUV) in 2020 and SINU in 2013. In essence, national universities tend to reflect the development priorities of home countries. In some instances, they invest in understanding the local security, cultural and economic implications of geopolitical shifts, exploratory projects like seabed mining and the existential threat of sea level rise.

In Australia and New Zealand, the role of universities has also come under scrutiny amidst the global wave of institutional decolonisation. Here, students, alumni and staff have confronted the imperial legacies of universities, advocating for divestment from non-renewable energy and for greater social and cultural inclusivity. There has also been a stronger emphasis on indigenous knowledge systems. The Pasifika Communities University² (PCU), launched as a university in 2025, exemplifies this trend. PCU distinguishes itself by its "whole of life" philosophy, integrating indigenous wisdom, ecological sustainability, and social justice. Similarly, SINU launched in 2025 a new teaching and research Centre for Islands Futures to "champion indigenous knowledge and sustainability."³

As national universities consolidate their presence in the Pacific higher education sector, it is important to pause and reflect on critical questions such as: whose standards of academic and economic success are being adhered to? What space do indigenous Pacific principles, values and epistemologies occupy in the visions, policies and governance models of Pacific university courses and leadership? As Aqorau and the panellists' responses have illuminated, Pacific educators and leaders need to be continuously evaluating where our strengths and weaknesses lie. Universities in the Pacific are in a unique position to lead the shaping and growing of epistemic sovereignty. This includes Levy's assertion about benchmarking from within rather than conforming to Eurocentric governance and models of success.

The university teaching and learning standards we abide by should be designed by and for Pacific peoples and ensure that they meet our diverse and ever-changing educational and developmental

2 Formerly the Pacific Theological College (PTC).

3 SINU Press Release 18 March 2025 'Solomon Islands National University Launches Centre for Islands Futures to Champion Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainability'. <https://tinyurl.com/48nhfrm4>

needs (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2023). There is considerable value in taking lessons from Pacific-centred scholarly innovations such as the development of Pacific Studies and by continuously re-evaluating ourselves to maintain our dignity in the face of modernisation, climate change and other global forces.

Furthermore, we stress Aqorau's point that universities play a significant role as incubators or catalysts to reforming leadership in tertiary education and by recentring from a model of prestige to a model of service. Leadership should not be about formal titles and structures, as Nanau points out, but about effective and impactful relationship building and cooperation. While we recognise that many modern universities are modelled on European origins that trace back to Medieval times, we could take greater pride in and draw inspiration from our own, equally deeply rooted traditional schools and modes of learning. At the core of many of these, such as those centred on traditional navigation (Thatcher & Evans, 2024), language (Zobule & McDougall, 2026), genealogies and oral tradition (Tengan et al., 2010), and visual and performative arts (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2011; Moulin, 2016) has been an appreciation of place-based, community-based and intergenerational learning rather than disciplinary knowledge. Indigenous languages, too, lie at the heart of this and could be integrated more extensively into university teaching and publishing (Radclyffe et al., 2025).

The Pacific's greatest resource, as Aqorau proclaims, is its peoples, cultures and traditional ways of life grounded in intimate bonds with our islands and environments. As new courses, programmes and research centres in Pacific universities continue to be created, developed and refined, these values must remain core. There is money to be made and greater international status that can be gained by appealing to non-indigenous consultants and postgraduate students who may be professionally required or have a genuine desire to learn about Pacific thinking and ways of living. However, as Pacific educators, we need to be mindful of investing time and resources into better understanding ourselves, how our cultures and societies are changing, and how we ethically and methodologically negotiate intersections between our diverse knowledge systems and Western worldviews. This is especially important for the increasing number of Pacific diasporic youth growing up disconnected from their ancestral lands, languages and cultural traditions, and with Artificial Intelligence posing powerful technological advantages but equally destructive ethical, economic and learning-related risks.

Conclusion

Aqorau concludes his address with hope:

Our canoe is ready. We have our values as the sail, our solidarity as the hull, and education and innovation as the guiding stars above. The journey will not be easy. It will demand courage to challenge the status quo, tenacity to stay the course through storms, and compassion to ensure everyone comes along. There will be obstacles: doubt, external pressures, internal disagreements. But I am confident that if we hold true to the spirit of the Pacific – a spirit of collaboration, community, and hope – we will prevail.

Inspired by Aqorau's words, our reflection has aimed to promote this message of hope during the challenging and divisive times we live in. We welcome further critical talanoa/tok stori between scholars from and of the Pacific on a reimagining of Pacific futures. Concurring with Aqorau, we see universities in the Pacific as well as indigenous Pacific academics and students studying abroad as key changemakers in shaping a more equitable, economically sustainable and just future for Oceania. The growth of new national universities in the region is thus promising and exciting. However, the ongoing challenge is developing the confidence to benchmark, first, from within, and to work together to meet the educational and developmental needs of the peoples of the Blue Pacific Continent.

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