

## **REGIONAL INITIATIVE TEMPLATE**

Please complete each section below.

### **1. Contact Details**

Please provide the following contact details:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Name of individual or group submitting initiative</b> | <i>The University of the South Pacific</i>  |
| <b>Name and position of primary contact</b>              | <i>Dr Fiona Willans</i>   |
| <b>Email address</b>                                     | <i>fiona.willans@usp.ac.fj</i>  |
| <b>Alternate email address</b>                           | <i>&lt;Enter text here&gt;</i>  |
| <b>Phone number</b>                                      | <i>+679 32 32699</i>  |
| <b>Fax number</b>  | <i>&lt;Enter text here&gt;</i>  |
| <b>Mailing address</b>                                   | <i>School of Language, Arts and Media,<br/>The University of the South Pacific,<br/>Laucala Campus<br/>Suva, Fiji</i> |

### **2. Name of Initiative**

*"Language Matters in Pacific Education"* interdisciplinary research group

### **3. Background and Rationale**

*You may consider: What is the issue being addressed by this initiative? What are the causes of this issue? Are there relevant studies that have been carried out to support the issue? Are there links to national, regional or international goals/policies?*

**Please limit your response to no more than 750 words.**

At the World Education Forum of 2015, the Incheon Declaration made a commitment to 'Learning for All' in place of 'Education for All', recognising that enabling children to attend school is of no benefit unless they are provided with *quality* education. However, all mentions of the languages through which children learn and all mentions of the languages to which they have access have strangely been removed from this latest document, despite UNESCO's long-standing insistence that these are key factors in the debate. The decades since the first World Conference on 'Education for All' in 1990 have witnessed a lack of direction within languages-in-education policymaking, with the result that national governments have been uncertain which languages to use as the medium of instruction, and which languages to prioritise for teaching as subjects. Individual countries within the Pacific region have taken a number of different approaches, undertaking numerous pilot projects and changing policy backwards and forwards, but taking very few opportunities to come together and share experience from research and from practice. As a result,

opportunities have been missed to shape the way languages are used and taught throughout the region's schools, and to understand the impact of such decisions on 'quality' learning experiences for all, from a Pacific-focused, evidence-based perspective. Whichever views one holds about the value of both indigenous languages and languages of wider communication such as English, it is undeniable that *language matters* in the endeavour to provide quality education.

Within the Pacific region, three recurring concerns are:

- 1) how to preserve and value our immense linguistic diversity;
- 2) how to ensure that children learn effectively through languages that they understand; and
- 3) how to provide successful access to languages of wider communication, such as English, French and Chinese.

These three goals are often felt to be in tension with one another, but a coherent strategy that tackles all three simultaneously is required. For example, it is imperative that languages such as English are taught well in order to meet the objective of enhanced regional integration, and yet fluent English speakers will be of no use to the region unless they also develop strong cognitive abilities right from the start of their education. Research both from within the region<sup>1</sup> and from further afield<sup>2</sup> strongly suggests that introducing English even earlier in a child's education is not the answer and yet, until we can pool the findings from research conducted in the region into alternative approaches, it is hard for national governments to know which directions they should be taking instead.

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is well-placed to take the lead in language-in-education policy in the region, given that it educates students from 12 of its countries, trains teachers for its primary and secondary schools, and conducts research and consultancy work in a number of its countries. USP is currently implementing a new strategy to enhance the English Language proficiency levels of its students and staff, but it does so mindful of the fact that it is tackling a systemic issue that begins much earlier in children's educational journeys. USP is committed to working with governments, teachers and stakeholders to promote change throughout the region, informing and collaborating on policies regarding the languages used as medium of instruction throughout primary and secondary schools, as well as the curricula and methodologies used in the teaching of English and other languages.

#### 4. Description

*Please provide a brief overview of this initiative. Try to address the following: Does this initiative contribute to a positive change to the region? What makes this initiative of importance to the Pacific region as a whole? Who would implement this initiative? Who are the main beneficiaries? Are regulatory or legislative changes required at the national level to implement this initiative? How would the initiative be funded? Has this initiative been carried out previously? What are the key risks in implementing this initiative? Are there any complementary projects and programmes currently active? What is the proposed timeframe for this initiative? How would the initiative be sustained over the proposed timeframe?*

***Please limit your response to no more than 750 words.***

Through its unique position as a regional tertiary institution, USP aims to inform policy regarding the teaching and

<sup>1</sup> For example: Klaus, David. (2003). The use of indigenous languages in early basic education in Papua New Guinea: A model for elsewhere? *Language and Education*, 17(2), 105-111.

Tamtam, Helen. (2008). The status of English as a language of education and communication in Vanuatu: Language issues affecting students (a case study). Paper presented at the Fifth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, University of London, 13-17 July.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Ouane, Adama & Glanz, Christine (Eds.). (2011). *Optimising learning, education and publishing in Africa: The language factor. A review and analysis of theory and practice in mother-tongue and bilingual education in sub-Saharan Africa*. Hamburg and Tunis Belvédère: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)/African Development Bank.

Weber, Jean-Jacques. (2014). *Flexible multilingual education: Putting children's needs first*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

educational use of languages within the Pacific region, by documenting and evaluating the various policy changes that have been implemented in national education systems. USP intends to spearhead this through the creation of a new interdisciplinary research group, *“Language Matters in Pacific Education”*, comprising staff and research students from the Linguistics Discipline, the Pacific Languages Unit, the Oceanic Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies, the School of Education, the Institute of Education, and the English Language Centre. This group will collaborate with Curriculum Development Units, Teacher Training Institutes and Ministries of Education from each of our member countries, building on collaborations that already exist, and bringing together evidence from both research and classroom practice to inform regional directions.

Every country in the region recognises the value of both quality education across the curriculum and successful language learning. However, directions within language-in-education policy throughout the region often respond to the strategic priorities of donor partners and to commitments to supranational declarations, whilst ignoring the wealth of knowledge and experience that is already inside the region. Ministries of Education and their associated institutions have a longevity of experience of what has already been tried, and of what has and has not worked, which is often overlooked in pursuit of policy change. Sharing of this knowledge and experience is vital if the region is to see meaningful and lasting change, but there is currently no other regional body equipped to take on this task and no regional oversight helping each national government to recognise the importance of language within their educational decision making. The specific needs of each national education system are unique and a successful policy cannot simply be borrowed from one context to another, but there are commonalities across the region on which all countries can draw, given the shared goals of providing access to both quality education and high levels of English proficiency.

The establishment of this research group promotes a long-term vision for stock-taking the research that has already been carried out in the region, and for conducting further collaborative research through which to inform policy throughout the region. Its aims are fourfold:

1. To raise awareness at the regional and national levels that language matters in Pacific education
2. To identify what has been done previously, noting what has and has not worked in which contexts
3. To pool our understanding of language-in-education issues, and their relevance to quality education
4. To ascertain the extent to which lessons can be shared regionally and sub-regionally

Specific outputs envisaged include:

- a long-overdue research review of policy changes, pilot project outcomes and research findings regarding medium of instruction that have been produced within each country of the USP region within the lifetime of each national Ministry of Education
- a long-overdue review of curriculum development regarding the teaching of English and other languages within each country of the USP region within the lifetime of each national Ministry of Education;
- original research conducted by MA and PhD students, co-funded by USP and national governments, following the strategic priorities of those national governments
- original research conducted by USP staff members, following the strategic priorities of member countries, and building on the foundations laid by the USP-led Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of Basic Education (PRIDE) project, with specific reference to language-in-education policy
- the organisation of regional conferences and workshops at which findings from research and practice can be shared
- the organisation of regional conferences and workshops through which stakeholders can collaborate on future directions for language-in-education policy

## 5. Alignment to Regional Vision, Values and Objectives

Briefly describe how your initiative supports the vision, values and objectives set out in the Framework for Pacific Regionalism. These can be found in the Framework for Pacific Regionalism document or in the submissions guideline document.

**Please limit your response to no more than 500 words**

The FPR has a vision for “a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion, and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy, and productive lives”. Achieving the objectives of sustainable development, economic growth, a strengthening of all systems, and the provision of security relies on a fundamental premise – that Pacific citizens have equitable access to quality education that provides them with a solid cognitive foundation, develops their knowledge and understanding to a high level, and teaches them to communicate locally, regionally and internationally. Language clearly matters in all aspects of Pacific education. This initiative brings language-in-education policy to the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders’ attention as a common challenge for the economic, cultural and social development of all our countries.

The “*Language Matters in Pacific Education*” research group will engender collaboration across the region. It will establish common language-related priorities, informing ways forward without undermining the individuality of each country’s linguistic context and national priorities. This proposal therefore meets the FPR’s **market test**, since it shares experience from practice and research rather than competing with an existing service, and it meets the **sovereignty test**, given that national governments will continue to set their own policies. It meets the **regionalism test** by establishing common positions on the routes to quality education and effective language learning in such a way that cannot be achieved through national understanding alone.

National governments currently outsource much of this work to external consultants, who rarely look across the region to see what has been done previously. We contend that the wealth of experience already accumulated within the region can inform strategy in a more coherent, cost-effective, and contextually-appropriate way. This therefore meets the **benefit test**. The members of our proposed research group are based at different campuses of USP throughout the region, and are already working closely with a variety of educational institutions and projects in a number of our member countries. Crucially, this ongoing work needs to be formalised and endorsed as a regional priority, enabling national Ministries of Education, Curriculum Development Units and Teacher Training Institutes throughout the Pacific to share their collective experiences in finding productive ways forward. This demonstrates that the proposal meets the **political oversight test**. With the support of the Pacific Island Forum Leaders, productive dialogue can be established amongst national policymakers, thereby deepening regionalism through enhanced policy cohesion and collaboration whilst also recognising the wealth of local knowledge that is already held within individual classrooms and communities.

Implementation will initially commence within USP, pooling the resources that are already available and the partnerships already in place with regional institutions without requiring additional capacity, as per the **risk and sustainability test**. Funding is available from USP to support projects aligned to the University's Strategic Priorities, including the enhancement of English proficiency as well as research into Pacific languages. This proposal to pool experience and practice is relatively simple in its scope, and yet has never been attempted on this scale, thereby meeting the **duplication test**.

## 6. Additional Information

*Please provide or attach additional information in support of this initiative.*

***Please limit your response to no more than 5 pages.***



OFFICE OF THE  
DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR  
Research and International

Research Office

The University of the South Pacific  
Private Mail Bag, Laucala Campus  
Suva, Fiji

Ph: (679) 323 2397  
Fax: (679) 323 1504  
Email: [research@usp.ac.fj](mailto:research@usp.ac.fj)  
[www.research.usp.fj](http://www.research.usp.fj)

The Secretary General  
Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat  
Private Mail Bag  
Suva, Fiji

Dear Secretary General,

I am writing to strongly support the application made to the Regional Initiatives Program made by Dr Fiona Willans and her team at the University of the South Pacific. The proposed project would have significant value for and impact within the region and also falls very clearly within the strategic research themes adopted by the University Council; namely, research on Pacific Cultures and Societies.

The University is currently making funding of its own available to researchers to match funding that comes from regional bodies and partners and clearly demonstrates academic quality, regional engagement and capacity building and collaboration across different academic disciplines. If supported under the PIFS Regional Initiatives Program, this proposal would, in my view, clearly meet the criteria for co-funding from the University and I am sure would be strongly supported as an initiative that is aligned with the strategic objectives of the University in building regionally engaged partnerships with concrete outcomes for Pacific peoples and nations.

I therefore recommend this project to you and express the support of the University for the programme of research that is proposed.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Derrick Armstrong". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a dotted line.

Prof Derrick Armstrong

Acting Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research & International)