Trip Report

Port Vila, Vanuatu: 16–24 December 202

Purpose of the Trip

The purpose of this mission was to undertake an essential academic and strategic task aimed at developing specific content for the Postgraduate Diploma in Islands Knowledge and Futures, a flagship initiative under the Solomon Islands National University (SINU). This innovative programme is designed to tackle pressing regional challenges faced by Pacific Island communities, such as environmental degradation, socio-economic inequality, and cultural erosion. It does so by integrating indigenous methodologies, traditional worldviews, and practical applications with modern research frameworks.

This trip to Port Vila, Vanuatu, was particularly significant as it provided the opportunity to draw from the shared experiences and expertise of the participants. It allowed for a critical examination of indigenous knowledge systems, governance models, and sustainability practices from Vanuatu, which have significant parallels with those of the Solomon Islands. The integration of these perspectives ensures that the programme content is regionally relevant and grounded in the realities of Pacific Island communities.

A key focus of the mission was the refinement of the structure and content of the four core units within the diploma: Foundations of Islands Being and Knowing, Guardianship, Methods for Islands Futures, and Islands Futures Approaches. These units form the backbone of the programme, providing students with an interdisciplinary approach that combines cultural, environmental, and socio-political dimensions.

This mission not only sought to enhance the academic rigour of the programme but also aimed to ensure its alignment with SINU's broader vision of becoming a leading institution in the Pacific. By fostering a curriculum that blends traditional wisdom with modern research tools, the programme aspires to empower future thought leaders who can address contemporary issues while respecting and preserving their cultural heritage.

In summary, this trip was pivotal in advancing the academic excellence of SINU, strengthening its commitment to sustainable development, and reinforcing its role as a centre for regional leadership in Pacific studies.

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Detailed Activities and Key Areas of Focus

CIF801: Foundations of Islands Being and Knowing

Objective:

The primary goal of this unit is to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the foundational elements that shape the identities and knowledge systems of Pacific Islands, with a special emphasis on the Solomon Islands. It explores the intricate interplay between epistemological (knowledge-related) and geophysical (place-related) identities, focusing on how these factors inform the cultural, societal, and environmental landscapes of the region. Students are encouraged to critically examine the historical, cultural, and scientific underpinnings that contribute to the unique characteristics of the islands, fostering an appreciation for indigenous perspectives alongside a deeper engagement with global contexts.

Key Content Created:

1. Modules on Space, Place, and Identity:

- The curriculum delves into the geological and biogeographical characteristics of the Pacific Islands, offering students an understanding of their physical environments. Topics include tectonic shifts, volcanic activity, and oceanic systems that shape the islands' geography and ecosystems.

- Students explore biodiversity hotspots such as the coral triangle, which underscores the Solomon Islands' ecological significance within the Pacific region.

- This module also incorporates discussions on the spiritual and cultural significance of place, examining how landscapes and seascapes influence identity formation within island communities.

2. Historical Narratives of Migration and Settlement:

- The unit highlights key historical movements, such as the Lapita-Austronesian migrations and Polynesian expansions, which have shaped the demographic and cultural landscapes of the Pacific Islands.

- Special emphasis is placed on the intersection of language, power structures, and migration patterns. For example, the influence of Austronesian languages in the Solomon Islands is contextualised within broader migration narratives, illustrating how language serves as a medium for cultural transmission and societal organisation.

- The curriculum also explores pivotal contact periods, colonial influences, and the subsequent shifts in societal dynamics that arose during these eras.

3. Indigenous Epistemologies and Knowledge Systems:

- A core component of the unit is the exploration of indigenous epistemologies—the ways of knowing and understanding rooted in local traditions, practices, and worldviews.

- Students critically engage with how indigenous knowledge systems interact with, oppose, or adapt to colonial and global knowledge frameworks. This includes discussions on the processes of epistemic decolonisation and the reclamation of indigenous perspectives.

- Examples from the Solomon Islands, such as the role of oral histories, traditional ecological knowledge, and cultural narratives, are used to illustrate the resilience and adaptability of these systems in the face of external influences.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of CIF801, students will:

- Understand the interconnectedness of geophysical and cultural identities within Pacific Island communities.

- Develop the ability to critically analyse the historical and contemporary factors that have shaped island societies, including the impact of migration, colonisation, and globalisation.

- Appreciate the value of indigenous knowledge systems and recognise their importance in addressing contemporary challenges, such as environmental sustainability and cultural preservation.

CIF801 establishes a robust foundation for students, enabling them to navigate the complexities of Pacific Island identities and knowledge systems with a balanced perspective. By blending scientific and indigenous frameworks, this unit equips students with the intellectual tools to engage meaningfully with the region's past, present, and future.

CIF802: Guardianship

Objective:

The core objective of this unit is to examine the delicate and dynamic balance between human societies and environmental stewardship, with a particular emphasis on the role of traditional governance systems in fostering sustainable practices. Guardianship, rooted in indigenous worldviews, offers a holistic approach to resource management that integrates cultural principles, spiritual beliefs, and reciprocal relationships with the natural world. By investigating these systems, the unit aims to highlight their relevance and adaptability in addressing contemporary challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and socio-economic transitions.

Key Content Created:

1. Modules on Customary Land Tenure and Political Economies:

- This module explores the foundational role of customary land tenure in shaping the economic and political structures of Pacific Island communities.

- Comparative analyses of systems in Melanesia and Polynesia reveal diverse approaches to land ownership, access rights, and resource management, underscoring the centrality of land to community identity and sovereignty.

- Discussions include how customary land tenure supports subsistence economies while posing challenges for large-scale development and foreign investments. The analysis highlights the tensions between preserving traditional systems and integrating them into modern economic frameworks.

2. Guardianship Practices vs Conservation:

- The unit examines the philosophical and practical differences between guardianship and conservation, challenging students to critically engage with Western and indigenous perspectives.

- Guardianship: Emphasises a relational approach where people view themselves as caretakers of the land and sea, guided by cultural norms, spiritual practices, and ancestral responsibilities.

- Conservation: Often rooted in external legal frameworks, focusing on preserving specific species or habitats, sometimes at odds with local communities' needs and practices.

- Indigenous practices such as seasonal closures, taboo sites, and traditional governance structures are explored as effective, culturally embedded tools for sustainable resource use. For example, traditional taboos prohibiting access to certain fishing grounds during breeding seasons ensure the long-term health of marine ecosystems.

- Case studies from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands illustrate how these practices continue to be relevant in contemporary settings, often outperforming formal conservation initiatives in ecological outcomes.

3. Climate Change Dynamics and Indigenous Adaptation:

- This module investigates the drivers and impacts of climate change on Pacific Island ecosystems and societies, including rising sea levels, increased storm intensity, and shifts in biodiversity.

- Indigenous approaches to adaptation are critically examined, highlighting practices such as the diversification of crops, sustainable fishing techniques, and community-led relocation strategies.

- Students are introduced to frameworks that integrate traditional knowledge with modern scientific approaches, fostering resilience in the face of environmental change.

- The curriculum also addresses the social and cultural dimensions of climate adaptation, such as the loss of ancestral lands and the displacement of communities, exploring how traditional guardianship practices can inform equitable solutions.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of CIF802, students will:

- Understand the philosophical and practical differences between guardianship and conservation and their implications for sustainable development.

- Analyse the role of customary land tenure in shaping political economies and resource governance in Pacific Island communities.

- Evaluate the impacts of climate change on Pacific ecosystems and societies and propose culturally appropriate adaptation strategies that integrate indigenous and scientific knowledge.

- Develop the ability to critically engage with resource management policies and advocate for the inclusion of indigenous perspectives in environmental governance.

CIF802 equips students with the knowledge and tools to understand and advocate for the sustainable management of resources through the lens of guardianship. By bridging traditional and modern approaches, the unit positions guardianship not just as a historical practice, but as a vital framework for addressing contemporary challenges in resource governance, climate adaptation, and cultural preservation. Through this unit, students are empowered to become stewards of their environment, capable of leading initiatives that honour both ecological balance and cultural integrity.

CIF803: Methods for Islands Futures

Objective:

The primary objective of this unit is to empower students with practical tools and methodologies that enable them to conduct research and implement solutions in indigenous contexts. These methods integrate traditional knowledge systems with modern technologies, fostering sustainable development and ethical engagement with Pacific Island communities. The unit equips students to navigate the complexities of resource management, cultural preservation, and climate resilience while upholding the sovereignty and values of indigenous communities.

Key Content Created:

1. Training Modules on Indigenous Terrain Mapping (ITM) and MAPEO Tools:

- Indigenous Terrain Mapping (ITM):

- ITM is introduced as a method for documenting and understanding the intricate relationships between people, place, and resources.

- Students learn how to map landscapes and seascapes, identifying key resources, access points, and ecological connections that are significant to indigenous communities.

- This method empowers communities by visualising their land-use patterns and resource territories, strengthening their claims to customary lands and waters in legal and developmental contexts.

- MAPEO Tools:

- These digital tools enable participants to create dynamic and interactive maps that combine traditional ecological knowledge with spatial data.

- Training includes hands-on activities using MAPEO to track environmental changes, manage resources, and support conservation efforts.

- The curriculum highlights how these tools can be adapted for various purposes, such as documenting biodiversity, mapping sacred sites, and monitoring land-use changes caused by external developments.

2. Inclusion of Methodologies like Tok Stori (Storytelling):

- Tok Stori is presented as a culturally rooted qualitative research methodology that prioritises oral traditions and narrative structures.

- Students learn to use storytelling as a means of gathering, interpreting, and presenting knowledge within indigenous contexts.

- This methodology respects the oral history traditions of Pacific Island communities and provides a platform for voices often marginalised in formal research frameworks.

- The module explores the various applications of Tok Stori, from understanding community priorities and land disputes to fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer.

- Customary Protocols for Community Engagement:

- The unit emphasises the importance of following traditional customs and protocols when engaging with indigenous communities.

- Students learn to navigate cultural norms, respect community leadership, and establish trust-based relationships to ensure ethical and productive research practices.

3. Modules on Bio-Cultural Mapping and AI Tools for Environmental Monitoring:

- Bio-Cultural Mapping:

- This module combines cultural narratives with scientific data to document the relationships between biodiversity and human activities.

- Students explore how bio-cultural maps can capture the interdependence of ecosystems and cultural practices, such as traditional fishing techniques or sacred forest management.

- Practical exercises guide students in creating bio-cultural maps using tools like MAPEO, with case studies illustrating their application in managing marine protected areas or cultural heritage sites.

- AI Tools such as REMOTO for Environmental Monitoring:

- REMOTO is introduced as a cutting-edge technology that leverages artificial intelligence for remote environmental monitoring.

- Students learn how AI tools can track changes in land use, biodiversity, and climate patterns, providing real-time data for decision-making.

- The curriculum highlights the ethical considerations of using AI in indigenous contexts, ensuring that such technologies are implemented in ways that respect local knowledge and sovereignty.

- Case studies demonstrate how REMOTO has been used to monitor coral reef health, detect illegal logging, and support sustainable agriculture practices.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of CIF803, students will:

- Gain proficiency in using indigenous and modern mapping tools to document and manage resources in culturally sensitive ways.

- Understand the principles and practices of storytelling as a research method, enabling them to engage effectively with indigenous communities.

- Learn to integrate traditional knowledge with advanced technologies, such as AI tools, to monitor and address environmental and societal challenges.

- Develop critical thinking skills to navigate the ethical and practical complexities of research in indigenous settings, ensuring outcomes that benefit local communities.

CIF803 equips students with a versatile toolkit that blends indigenous methodologies with modern research techniques, fostering innovation in sustainable development and cultural preservation. This unit empowers students to contribute meaningfully to the resilience and self-determination of Pacific Island communities by honouring traditional knowledge while leveraging the advantages of modern technology. Through CIF803, students become agents of change who can bridge the gap between cultural heritage and contemporary research and governance frameworks.

CIF804: Islands Futures Approaches

Objective:

The primary objective of CIF804 is to bridge theoretical insights into indigenous methodologies with their practical applications in governance, sustainable development, and future-oriented decision-making. The unit is designed to empower students to critically evaluate existing systems, develop innovative solutions, and propose strategies for achieving sustainability and resilience in Pacific Island communities. By connecting traditional wisdom with contemporary tools, CIF804 ensures that students can navigate complex socio-political and ecological challenges with sensitivity and effectiveness.

Key Content Created:

1. Modules on Contested Knowledge Systems:

- Written vs. Oral Traditions:

- The module explores the differences between written and oral knowledge systems, focusing on how oral traditions preserve cultural histories, governance practices, and ecological wisdom.

- Students critically examine the limitations of written systems in capturing the nuances of oral knowledge and discuss how these traditions can complement formal records to inform policy and governance.

- Codified vs. Customary Laws:

- The curriculum delves into the tensions between state-led legal frameworks and indigenous customary laws.

- Students analyse case studies where these systems intersect, conflict, or align, such as land tenure disputes, resource management, and cultural heritage preservation.

- Comparative analysis of customary law systems in Melanesia and Polynesia highlights their adaptability and relevance in contemporary governance.

- Terminological and Conceptual Dichotomies:

- Key concepts such as "Small Island Developing States" (SIDS) versus "Big Ocean States" (BOS) are discussed to illustrate shifts in identity, sovereignty, and global positioning.

- Discussions on contested terminologies and concepts (e.g., matriarchal vs. patriarchal governance systems) provide students with a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity and governance in island contexts.

2. Development of Case Studies on Governance and Resilience:

- Resource Governance:

- Students engage with real-world examples of resource governance, such as community-led fisheries management, forestry practices, and mineral resource extraction.

- Case studies emphasise the importance of integrating traditional management practices with formal governance structures to achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes.

- Sovereignty and Self-Determination:

- This module highlights challenges to sovereignty faced by Pacific Island nations, including geopolitical pressures, economic dependencies, and environmental vulnerabilities.

- Students critically analyse strategies for asserting sovereignty and self-determination in the context of globalisation and climate change.

- Ecological Resilience:

- Practical examples of resilience-building initiatives, such as mangrove restoration projects, coral reef conservation, and climate adaptation planning, are explored.

- Students learn to assess and design projects that prioritise both ecological sustainability and community well-being.

3. Future Scenario Planning and Sustainable Resource Utilisation:

- Scenario Planning:

- Students are introduced to future scenario planning as a strategic tool for envisioning and preparing for potential challenges and opportunities.

- Modules include exercises in developing scenarios based on variables such as climate impacts, demographic changes, and geopolitical trends.

- Sustainable Resource Utilisation:

- This module equips students with strategies to balance resource extraction and conservation.

- Topics include sustainable fisheries, renewable energy initiatives, and land-use planning that respects cultural and ecological boundaries.

- Case studies highlight successful examples of resource utilisation that align with indigenous values, such as small-scale aquaculture and agroforestry systems.

Key Engagements and Outcomes

1. Integration of Theory and Practice:

- CIF804 successfully connects academic theory with practical applications, ensuring that students are prepared to implement solutions in real-world contexts.

- The unit's focus on contested knowledge systems provides students with critical insights into the complexities of governance and decision-making in Pacific Island communities.

2. Holistic Skill Development:

- Students develop a well-rounded skill set, including critical thinking, scenario planning, and project design, enabling them to address multifaceted challenges in governance and sustainable development.

3. Empowerment for Leadership:

- By exploring sovereignty, resource management, and ecological resilience, CIF804 equips students with the knowledge and confidence to lead initiatives that prioritise the long-term sustainability of their communities.

4. Cultural Sensitivity and Innovation:

- The unit emphasises the importance of respecting and integrating indigenous knowledge systems into modern governance frameworks, fostering innovative approaches to sustainability and resilience.

CIF804 positions students as future leaders and change-makers, capable of addressing the unique challenges faced by Pacific Island communities. By bridging theory with practice, this unit ensures that graduates are equipped to make informed, culturally sensitive, and innovative contributions to governance and sustainable development. It underscores the critical role of traditional wisdom in shaping the future of Pacific Island nations while empowering students to navigate global dynamics with confidence and competence.

Future Collaborations and Partnerships

1. Strengthening Regional Networks:

- SINU will actively pursue partnerships with regional academic and cultural institutions to integrate indigenous practices and knowledge systems into the broader Pacific framework.

- Efforts will focus on establishing connections with practitioners specialising in areas such as marine conservation, customary land management, and climate resilience, facilitating the exchange of best practices and innovative methodologies.

2. Workshops and Consultations:

- SINU plans to conduct workshops and consultations to ensure curriculum development aligns with regional priorities, such as sustainable resource governance and cultural preservation.

- Future engagements will involve gathering case studies and practical examples to enrich the curriculum, ensuring its relevance to Pacific Island communities' specific challenges and opportunities.

3. Refinement of Course Assessments:

- SINU will enhance practical assessments, including expanding the Solutions Ontological Immersion Learning (SOIL) programme to provide more field-based learning opportunities.

- Future refinements will focus on balancing theoretical knowledge with applied methodologies, equipping students to effectively address real-world challenges.

Implications for SINU

1. Academic Innovation and Leadership:

- SINU is positioned to lead in delivering postgraduate education grounded in indigenous knowledge and responsive to global challenges. The integration of tools like bio-cultural mapping and AI-based monitoring ensures students are equipped to manage resources sustainably.

2. Strengthening Indigenous Knowledge Systems:

- Incorporating traditional governance models and knowledge systems into the curriculum safeguards cultural heritage while addressing contemporary challenges.

- The emphasis on guardianship as a culturally appropriate framework strengthens SINU's role in promoting effective environmental stewardship practices.

3. Enhancing Regional Influence:

- SINU's engagement with regional institutions and practitioners strengthens its capacity for collaboration and joint research initiatives.

- The integration of diverse Pacific perspectives enhances the relevance and appeal of SINU's programmes across the region.

4. Future Directions for SINU:

- Programme Accreditation: Pursue accreditation of the Postgraduate Diploma with both regional and international bodies to enhance its credibility and reach.

- Research Centre for Islands Knowledge: Establish a research hub to drive innovation in Pacific-focused studies and methodologies.

- Curriculum Expansion: Develop additional modules on emerging topics such as ocean nationhood, carbon policy, and sustainable development strategies.

- Sustainability and SDGs: Align programme outcomes with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on climate action, education, and sustainable communities.

Conclusion

The trip was a significant milestone for the Solomon Islands National University (SINU), laying the groundwork for a transformative educational paradigm that blends the richness of traditional knowledge systems with the rigour of modern research practices. This innovative approach, exemplified in the Postgraduate Diploma in Islands Knowledge and Futures, establishes SINU as a leader in Pacific academic excellence, with a curriculum tailored to address the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Pacific Island communities.

The programme not only fosters intellectual growth among students but also equips them with the tools and methodologies needed to make meaningful contributions to their communities. By integrating indigenous methodologies, such as guardianship, oral traditions, and bio-cultural mapping, with contemporary approaches like AI-assisted environmental monitoring and scenario planning, the programme empowers students to tackle pressing

issues, including climate change, resource governance, and cultural preservation. This synergy of traditional and modern practices ensures that graduates are well-prepared to lead sustainable development efforts that honour cultural heritage while embracing innovation.

The outcomes of this initiative extend far beyond the immediate scope of the Postgraduate Diploma. They provide a model for future SINU programmes to adopt a systems-based and transdisciplinary approach to learning. This means that every SINU programme, regardless of discipline, will eventually integrate interconnected systems of knowledge, emphasising the relationships between ecological, cultural, social, and economic dimensions. A transdisciplinary approach will ensure that students are exposed to diverse perspectives, drawing on multiple fields of study to holistically address complex challenges. For example, a student studying business might engage with ecological principles, while an education student could explore how cultural narratives inform pedagogical practices.

This shift to a systems-based and transdisciplinary framework will redefine SINU's academic landscape, making it a beacon of innovative and contextually relevant education in the Pacific. By fostering collaboration across disciplines and drawing on the strengths of traditional knowledge, SINU is poised to contribute significantly to the broader development and sustainability of Pacific Island communities. This approach aligns seamlessly with global priorities, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring that SINU graduates are not only equipped for local leadership but are also prepared to address global challenges.

Ultimately, this transformative vision for SINU's educational framework will help nurture a generation of leaders and thinkers capable of fostering resilience, innovation, and sustainable progress across the Pacific and beyond. By embedding this philosophy into all programmes, SINU underscores its commitment to advancing education that is as culturally grounded as it is forward-looking.

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27 December 2024