

# Trip Report: SINU Vice-Chancellor's Visit to University of Melbourne (23–25 June 2025)

**Overview:** Professor Transform Aqorau (Vice-Chancellor of Solomon Islands National University) and Ms. Siona Koti (Executive Officer) visited the University of Melbourne from 23–25 June 2025 to strengthen partnerships across several strategic areas. The visit featured focused meetings on climate change, Indigenous knowledge, innovation, health, higher education and governance, as well as Prof. Aqorau's keynote address at an Oceania Conversations forum. University of Melbourne hosts, ranging from the Vice-Chancellor (Professor Emma Johnston) to faculty experts and Pacific researchers, warmly welcomed the SINU delegation. Over three days, the parties engaged in in-depth discussions aimed at building collaborative programs and research initiatives in support of Pacific development priorities. Each thematic engagement is summarized below, followed by a consolidated list of agreed follow-up actions.

## Indigenous Knowledge and Research Collaboration

The visit opened with a meeting at the Indigenous Knowledge Institute (IKI) alongside Professor Aaron Corn (IKI Director) and Mr. Joe Williams (PhD researcher). The conversation immediately found common ground: both universities emphasize elevating Indigenous knowledge systems within academia and community development. Prof. Aqorau shared SINU's approach through its new Centre for Islands Futures (CIF), which blends ancestral wisdom with modern research via *Living Labs* and immersive "SOIL" learning in villages. This resonated strongly with IKI's mission to bridge Indigenous and Western knowledge and support Indigenous-led scholarship. (*In his forum keynote, Prof. Aqorau highlighted that drawing on "the best of both worlds" – traditional wisdom and cutting-edge science – is essential for a sustainable future, setting a tone of reciprocity and mutual learning for this partnership.*)

**Stakeholders & Discussion:** Professor Corn described IKI's cross-disciplinary projects (spanning health, climate, law, arts) and its efforts to ensure data sovereignty and community engagement in research. The SINU delegation outlined its postgraduate Diploma in Island Knowledge and Futures and other initiatives that position Solomon Islands as a leader in Indigenous knowledge research. Both sides discussed opportunities for joint work – for example, connecting IKI's digital heritage expertise with CIF's on-the-ground *Living Labs*. There was particular enthusiasm for linking Mr. Williams' ongoing PhD research with SINU's community-based research sites for comparative studies. They also explored ideas like co-hosting a Pacific Indigenous knowledge dialogue series and exchanging staff or postdoctoral scholars to build capacity.

**Outcomes:** The meeting affirmed a strong alignment of values and intent to develop a *strategic, peer-to-peer partnership* (not a one-way capacity-building exercise). Concretely, the institutes agreed to pursue an exchange that would bring Mr. Williams to SINU's CIF for field research, embedding him in local "living classrooms" to enrich both his work and SINU's projects. To enable this and future collaboration, the teams will work toward formalizing ties (potentially via a new Memorandum of Understanding or an addendum to the existing SINU–Melbourne MoU). They also identified comparative research themes (such as land–sea management practices and digital knowledge repositories) as fertile ground for joint inquiry. Overall, this session set a collaborative tone, with both institutions viewing each other as co-creators of knowledge. (*Prof. Aqorau's keynote remarks reinforced this ethos, arguing that Pacific cultures are not relics but central to innovating solutions –*

*“our villages’ knowledge is as important as the knowledge in libraries” – underscoring that SINU will engage as an equal knowledge partner.)*

### **Climate Change and Sustainability**

Climate collaboration was a prominent focus throughout the visit. Early on, University of Melbourne’s Vice-Chancellor, Professor Emma Johnston (a marine ecologist by background), expressed strong support for joint work on marine conservation and the ocean–climate nexus, underlining the university’s commitment to the SINU partnership. This high-level endorsement set the stage for the dedicated climate change meeting on 24 June with Melbourne Climate Futures (MCF), the university’s flagship climate initiative. At MCF, Associate Professor Rebecca Patrick and Dr. Annabelle Workman introduced how Melbourne is mobilizing interdisciplinary research for a sustainable, equitable climate future. They highlighted MCF’s focus on real-world impact – for example, its Climate Health (CATCH) Lab that links climate change with public health innovation. The SINU side shared updates on Solomon Islands’ climate priorities and the role of SINU’s Centre for Islands Futures in community resilience, including initiatives like the Living Labs and the upcoming 5th Pacific Ocean–Pacific Climate Change Conference (POPCCC) that SINU will host in 2026. Prof. Aqorau emphasized that Pacific nations refuse to be seen merely as victims of climate change – instead, they seek to lead with indigenous knowledge and proactive adaptation strategies (as he articulated in his keynote, rejecting the “helpless victim” narrative in favor of showcasing cultural resilience).

**Stakeholders & Discussion:** The Melbourne Climate Futures team and SINU delegates discussed collaborative research and capacity-building opportunities. One key topic was climate and health, where both institutions are active: MCF described ongoing projects on climate impacts to health (e.g. heat stress, vector-borne disease), and SINU highlighted its own projects like FALAH (addressing food security and health under climate stress). They explored integrating traditional knowledge into climate research – for instance, studying how ancestral agricultural practices or coastal management in Solomon Islands can inform scientific adaptation models. The SINU team also invited Melbourne to engage in its Living Labs approach (immersive community-based research), an offer which appealed to MCF’s regional focus. Notably, the upcoming 2026 POP Climate Change Conference was a centerpiece of discussion: the Melbourne colleagues were keen to contribute their expertise and networks to ensure the conference’s success and reach. Ideas arose around Melbourne co-convening a special session on climate policy or climate–health linkages during the event.

**Outcomes:** The University of Melbourne committed support for SINU’s 2026 climate conference and broader climate resilience efforts. Both sides agreed to formally partner for the 2026 POPCCC, with Melbourne Climate Futures participating in the conference program and helping attract global attention. Plans were made to organize at least one joint panel session at the conference featuring Melbourne and SINU experts. Beyond the event, the dialogue yielded concrete collaboration avenues: for example, exploring the co-development of a Pacific climate–health curriculum or certificate program linking MCF’s Climate CATCH Lab with SINU’s Faculty of Science and allied health programs. Such a program would blend MCF’s scientific research with SINU’s community knowledge to train practitioners in climate adaptation and health. Additionally, the teams identified potential joint research projects using Solomon Islands as a case study hub – e.g. comparative studies on climate adaptation strategies or pilot interventions in local communities. Going forward, the intention is to sustain a close working relationship on climate issues. *(Indeed, Prof. Aqorau’s keynote noted that integrating ancestral wisdom with modern science is exactly the kind of holistic approach*

*needed for climate resilience, and this principle is reflected in the collaborative plans forged with Melbourne.)*

### **Health and Medical Sciences Partnerships**

Strengthening health and medical education was another key objective of the visit. On 24 June, the SINU delegation met with representatives of the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS) at the University of Melbourne. Attending on Melbourne's side were Professor Cathy Vaughan (Director of the Nossal Institute for Global Health), Associate Professor Anita Horvath (Medical Education), Ms. Mariam Hachem (Baker Heart & Diabetes Institute), Ms. Kiara Bechta-Metti (Innovation & Enterprise), and Ms. Miriam Cahir (International Relations, MDHS) – a multidisciplinary group reflecting Melbourne's broad health expertise. SINU conveyed the pressing health challenges in Solomon Islands (from high rates of non-communicable diseases and diabetes to persistent infectious diseases like malaria) and its own programs in areas such as nursing, public health, and environmental health. The discussion centered on how a partnership could build capacity in health systems and workforce development, while tailoring solutions to Pacific contexts.

**Stakeholders & Discussion:** Professor Vaughan and colleagues described Melbourne's capabilities in public health research, health workforce training, and health innovation. The Nossal Institute, in particular, specializes in health systems strengthening and community health in the Asia-Pacific, making it a natural partner for SINU's needs. The Baker Institute's representative, Ms. Hachem, brought expertise in diabetes and cardiometabolic health, which aligned with SINU's concern over rising diabetes rates. The meeting delved into specific collaborative ideas: one was developing new academic programs and curricula at SINU with Melbourne's input – for example, incorporating mental health and climate resilience into health training. SINU noted it is already updating a public health curriculum and welcomed Melbourne's support to integrate cutting-edge topics (like climate-health links and digital health tools). Another major topic was combating diabetes and other NCDs: the group discussed a pilot initiative to improve access to diabetes technology (such as affordable monitoring devices) in Solomon Islands, coupled with a community education campaign on diabetes prevention leveraging local diets and Indigenous food knowledge. The role of social determinants and community-led approaches was emphasized, with agreement that solutions must engage local food systems and culture (an area where SINU's CIF and agriculture faculty can collaborate with health programs). They also touched on health workforce training – how to upskill current nurses and health officers and better prepare new graduates. Melbourne's team suggested opportunities like short courses for Solomon Islands health professionals, exchange visits for faculty or students, and even co-supervision of postgraduate research in public health.

**Outcomes:** The MDHS meeting concluded with a clear commitment to co-develop initiatives in priority areas of mental health, climate-related health adaptation, and chronic disease prevention. Both universities agreed to coordinate on curriculum enhancements – for instance, SINU will designate focal points to work with Melbourne experts on integrating mental health modules and climate resilience content into courses. There was a shared enthusiasm to pursue a pilot diabetes intervention program in Solomon Islands: this would entail collaborating with the Baker Institute to introduce appropriate diabetes technology and culturally-informed prevention strategies in communities. The Nossal Institute and SINU plan to initiate a joint research project on local food systems and health, examining how traditional diets and agriculture could inform community-driven NCD prevention. To support these efforts, Melbourne's Innovation & Enterprise unit (represented by Ms. Bechta-Metti) signalled interest in exploring social enterprise models for health, potentially helping SINU develop sustainable ventures (like local nutraceuticals or telehealth services) that address health needs. On the

human capacity side, an exchange of personnel was encouraged: for example, Melbourne may send health researchers or economists on sabbatical to work with SINU's Faculty of Nursing, Medicine & Health Sciences (FNHMS), and reciprocally SINU could nominate staff to spend time in Melbourne's institutes. (*As a side engagement, Prof. Aqorau also conversed with a University of Melbourne health economist, Professor Devine, who expressed interest in collaborating on malaria and health systems research, reinforcing the momentum to link SINU's medical school with Melbourne's expertise in infectious disease and policy.*) In sum, the health partnership discussions yielded a multi-pronged plan: improve education and training at SINU, collaborate on research and innovation to tackle Solomon Islands' health priorities, and leverage Melbourne's global health networks to support SINU's mission.

### **Innovation and Entrepreneurship**

On the afternoon of 24 June, the focus shifted to innovation ecosystems and entrepreneurship. The SINU delegation visited Melbourne Connect, the University of Melbourne's state-of-the-art innovation precinct, and met with Mr. Phil Callaghan, its Director of Operations. Melbourne Connect is a vibrant hub where researchers, tech start-ups, industry partners, and students co-locate and collaborate. For SINU – which is planning its own Innovation Hub as part of campus development – this visit was an illuminating case study in how a university-driven innovation district operates. Mr. Callaghan gave the visitors a tour of the “Superfloor” at Melbourne Connect, showcasing the mix of workspaces, laboratories, maker spaces, and even residential and community facilities that make the precinct a living innovation community. He explained the public-private partnership (PPP) model behind Melbourne Connect's establishment (a collaboration between the university and Lendlease) and how that enabled a cutting-edge complex that serves both academia and the private sector. The SINU side was particularly interested in how this model could inform their own infrastructure plans. (SINU's upcoming PPP project, referred to as the Panatina Valley Campus Complex or “PVCC,” is envisioned to include an innovation and technology center.) The Melbourne Connect discussion emphasized breaking down silos: by housing diverse disciplines and external partners together, the precinct accelerates problem-solving and product development in areas from digital technology to sustainable engineering. The visitors saw direct parallels to challenges and opportunities in Honiara, where connecting academia with industry and entrepreneurs could drive local solutions for issues like climate change, youth unemployment, and digital inclusion.

Immediately following, the delegation met with the leaders of the Melbourne Entrepreneurial Centre (MEC) – Ms. Stefani Adams (Acting Executive Director) and Mr. Rory McNiece (Operations Manager). MEC is the engine for entrepreneurship training and startup support at UoM, running programs such as the Melbourne Accelerator (for scaling startups) and the Velocity pre-accelerator for early-stage ideas. In this meeting, SINU aimed to learn how to foster an entrepreneurial mindset among students and faculty, and how to support budding enterprises in a resource-limited environment. Ms. Adams described MEC's “idea to IPO” suite of programs – from student hackathons and pitch competitions up to structured accelerators – and how these not only help launch companies but also embed innovation skills in the university culture. Mr. McNiece recounted success stories of student-founded startups and explained how MEC taps into alumni mentors, industry advisors, and funding partners to nurture ventures. For SINU, with Solomon Islands' very young population and many grassroots innovators, the discussion sparked ideas to adapt some of these models locally. They discussed, for example, running a *joint virtual hackathon* between University of Melbourne and SINU students to tackle Pacific development challenges, as a way to kickstart the innovation culture and build international links. They also considered the feasibility of SINU students

participating in MEC's programs (perhaps a Pacific-themed track in the annual startup competition), and conversely, inviting Melbourne mentors to support entrepreneurship events at SINU remotely.

**Outcomes:** The innovation and entrepreneurship engagements yielded both immediate insights and longer-term collaboration plans. From the Melbourne Connect visit, SINU leaders gained a concrete sense of how a mixed-use innovation precinct functions. They came away recognizing Melbourne Connect as a *model blueprint* for their own planned hub. An outcome of the meeting was an agreement in principle for reciprocal site visits: key personnel from SINU's PVCC project will visit Melbourne Connect for deeper learning, and Melbourne Connect's team may visit Honiara once SINU's facilities develop, to advise and strengthen ties. Mr. Callaghan also offered to share documentation on the PPP framework and operational guidelines that made Melbourne Connect successful, which will be forwarded to SINU's infrastructure planning committee. Both sides saw value in possibly writing a case study or joint paper on PPPs in education infrastructure, comparing notes from Melbourne and Honiara – a project that could inform other Pacific institutions contemplating innovation precincts.

For entrepreneurship programs, the Melbourne Entrepreneurial Centre meeting paved the way for ongoing mentorship and exchange. One concrete idea was to establish an entrepreneurship hub or incubator at SINU, leveraging MEC's experience in setting it up. The SINU VC and MEC leaders agreed to keep communication open to guide this process. In the near term, they plan to organize a virtual speaker series or workshop whereby MEC experts deliver training sessions to SINU students and aspiring entrepreneurs (covering topics like how to develop a business model, or basics of pitching a startup). They also discussed collaborating on a small-scale startup competition or "innovation challenge" tailored to Pacific issues – for instance, a challenge on climate-smart agriculture or ed-tech for remote communities, with teams from both universities participating. MEC expressed willingness to include promising Solomon Islands startup teams in their programs (e.g. allowing a top SINU-affiliated startup to join the Velocity pre-accelerator remotely, or even compete for a spot in the Melbourne Accelerator Program in the future). These arrangements would give SINU innovators exposure to a broader entrepreneurial ecosystem. In summary, the Melbourne Connect and MEC meetings left SINU with a clearer roadmap for building an innovation ecosystem at home, supported by Melbourne as a knowledge partner. The agreed outcomes center on knowledge exchange – bringing SINU's new Panatina innovation hub concept to life through site visits, shared frameworks, mentorship, and joint innovation activities.

### **Peacebuilding and Governance**

A significant portion of the visit was devoted to peacebuilding and governance, reflecting SINU's aspiration to contribute to social cohesion and regional stability through education. On 23 June, Prof. Aqorau met with Dr. Tania Miletic, Assistant Director of the University of Melbourne's Initiative for Peacebuilding. This meeting came against the backdrop of SINU's emerging role in peace leadership: the Vice-Chancellor shared that SINU is championing a nationwide reconciliation initiative in Solomon Islands, aiming to address unresolved tensions from past conflicts and strengthen national unity. Additionally, SINU and UoM have been developing a joint concept to integrate Solomon Islands' and Bougainville's peace process experiences into academic programs. At the University of Melbourne, Dr. Miletic's Initiative for Peacebuilding focuses on research and education to prevent conflict, especially in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, the meeting revolved around how both institutions could collaborate to build capacity in peace studies and conflict resolution, and how SINU could draw on Melbourne's expertise to advance its peace education agenda.

Stakeholders & Discussion: Dr. Miletic outlined the work of the Initiative for Peacebuilding, including its multidisciplinary approach and emphasis on dialogue and policy engagement in conflict prevention. The SINU delegation described two concept notes it has developed: one for a *Solomon Islands National Reconciliation* program (a three-year plan for dialogues across provinces), and another for a *Peacebuilding Education Collaboration* involving SINU, University of Melbourne, and counterparts in Bougainville. The latter proposes co-designing curriculum that blends customary conflict resolution practices with contemporary peacebuilding theory, drawing lessons from Solomon Islands' "Ethnic Tensions" and Bougainville's post-conflict journey. In the meeting, they homed in on creating a joint postgraduate course or module on Pacific peacebuilding. This would include case studies from both Solomon Islands and Bougainville, taught by faculty from SINU and UMelb (and potentially guest lecturers from Bougainville or other Pacific nations). They also discussed a professional training program or certificate for peace practitioners – something that could credential community leaders, government officials, or NGO workers in conflict resolution and mediation techniques. Dr. Miletic was enthusiastic about these ideas, noting that they align with Melbourne's aim to partner regionally and that such a program could extend the Initiative's impact into the Pacific. The involvement of Australian National University (ANU) was also mentioned; since ANU has expertise in Pacific peace and is already working with SINU on some aspects (individual experts "James" and "Dennis" were cited as having built momentum on this initiative), it would be natural to form a tri-party collaboration among SINU, UMelb, and ANU. Another topic was how to approach curriculum design – they agreed it should be highly participatory and dialogue-based, mirroring peacebuilding's emphasis on inclusive conversation. Incorporating indigenous concepts of peace and reconciliation (like Solomon Islands' *kastom* practices and Bougainville's customary laws) was seen as critical for local relevance.

**Outcomes:** The peacebuilding meeting resulted in a clear commitment to move from ideas to implementation. Dr. Miletic and Prof. Aqorau agreed on using the planned Bougainville–Solomon Islands peace curriculum as the entry point for collaboration. In practice, this means the teams will begin drafting a pilot curriculum/module outline that can be reviewed and developed jointly. This pilot module could be a segment of a larger course or a standalone short course focusing on the comparative peace processes of Bougainville and Solomon Islands. They also concurred on the goal of establishing a Postgraduate Certificate in Dialogue and Peacebuilding in the medium term. Such a certificate would likely be co-badged by SINU and UoM, ensuring international academic standards while grounding content in Melanesian contexts. To maintain momentum, the participants plan to hold a co-design workshop in Honiara (at SINU's Panatina campus), bringing together stakeholders from SINU, University of Melbourne, and ANU later in the year. This workshop will flesh out curriculum content and coordination logistics for the peacebuilding program. Additionally, they agreed to form a working group (with members from all partner institutions) to oversee next steps beyond curriculum – including developing any joint research outputs (e.g. comparative studies on customary law and peace), ensuring any new certificate program meets accreditation needs, and facilitating faculty exchanges to support teaching.

Governance, in the context of university leadership and administration, was also a theme during the visit. On 25 June, Prof. Aqorau met with Dr. Nancy Huggett, the University of Melbourne's University Secretary, to exchange perspectives on higher education governance. They discussed governance structures, policies, and the importance of upholding integrity within university operations. Prof. Aqorau conveyed that SINU is striving to model *good governance practices* as it reforms – as he had emphasized in his keynote, he envisions SINU as an "oasis of good governance" that leads by example in accountability and ethics. Dr. Huggett shared insights from Melbourne's

experience in managing university council affairs, academic board processes, and risk management. While this was a more informational meeting, it reinforced SINU's efforts to strengthen its institutional governance. Outcome: The Vice-Chancellor gained valuable ideas on refining SINU's governance framework (such as committee structures and policy development), and both parties expressed interest in continuing this dialogue. The takeaway was that robust governance is foundational to all the academic collaborations being pursued – it ensures that partnerships can be sustained through transparent and effective institutional support.

*(In summary, the peacebuilding and governance engagements underlined SINU's expanding role beyond traditional academia – positioning the university as a facilitator of peace and a benchmark of good governance in society. Prof. Aqorau's public remarks during the Oceania forum echoed this, calling for Pacific institutions to lead in shaping their futures, whether in security or development, rather than relying on external actors. The collaborative plans with Melbourne in peace education and the exchange on governance are tangible steps toward that vision.)*

### **Higher Education and Teacher Training**

The final theme of the visit centered on higher education systems and teacher training – critical areas as SINU works to raise its academic standards and output. A key meeting on 25 June was with Professor Chi Baik of the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education (MCSHE). SINU's interest here was twofold: improving teacher education (since SINU houses the nation's School of Education and is responsible for training teachers) and enhancing overall quality assurance and academic development at the university. Professor Baik and his team specialize in higher education pedagogy, curriculum design, and academic staff development, making them well suited to advise on SINU's priorities. During the meeting, Prof. Aqorau outlined the challenges SINU faces in teacher training – for example, outdated curricula in some programs, limited practicum opportunities for trainee teachers, and a need for more structured professional development for lecturers. He also shared SINU's strategic goal to have its degrees meet international standards and produce graduates competitive globally. (In his keynote, he had articulated the hope that within 5–10 years SINU graduates' qualifications would be recognized internationally, achieved through curriculum reforms and partnerships. This meeting was a direct effort to realize that goal.)

**Stakeholders & Discussion:** Professor Baik responded very positively, affirming that the University of Melbourne is eager to support SINU's educational development. He noted that improving teacher training is pivotal because quality teachers will, in turn, elevate the entire education system. The discussion was systematic, identifying several core areas for collaboration: (1) Curriculum review and modernization – jointly examining SINU's education (and other) curricula to update content and incorporate modern pedagogy. Melbourne offered to help benchmark SINU's curricula against global standards and integrate new topics (for instance, inclusive education strategies, use of technology in teaching, etc.). (2) Academic staff capacity building – enhancing the skills of SINU's lecturers and instructors. This might involve training workshops by Melbourne experts, opportunities for SINU staff to observe or co-teach with Melbourne faculty (virtually or in visits), and sharing teaching resources. (3) Teaching practicum and student teacher experience – strengthening how SINU prepares its education students through practical classroom experience. The team discussed creating more robust practicum placements for SINU's trainee teachers and possibly setting up model “lab school” arrangements or peer observation systems. (4) ICT in education – building capacity for using digital tools in teacher training and in the classroom. Melbourne could assist in training SINU's teacher educators on educational technologies and online pedagogies, which became especially crucial in the wake of recent global shifts to remote learning. (5) Infrastructure for teacher training – Prof. Aqorau

mentioned SINU's idea of establishing a *Teaching Practicum and Resource Laboratory*, a dedicated space with teaching materials, demo classrooms, and video facilities to simulate teaching practice. Melbourne's input was sought on how to design and utilize such a facility effectively. (6) Mentoring and induction for new lecturers – creating a structured system at SINU where new academic staff receive mentoring, peer support, and training in teaching methods. Melbourne has experience with faculty development programs that could be adapted for this purpose.

**Outcomes:** This meeting was highly productive, yielding a roadmap for a comprehensive partnership in higher education enhancement. Melbourne unequivocally offered support for SINU's teacher training reforms and broader academic development, agreeing on a collaborative approach to build capacity. One immediate outcome was the decision to formalize this collaboration via an MoU addendum or specific partnership agreement focusing on teacher education. By documenting the partnership, both sides can allocate resources and plan activities more effectively. They set out a sequence of next steps: first, to conduct a thorough needs assessment (gap analysis) of SINU's current programs and identify specific gaps in curriculum content, practicum structure, and faculty skills. Melbourne will help review syllabi and standards, and work with SINU to develop a detailed reform *roadmap*. Next, based on the identified needs, they will initiate a capacity-building plan – this may include short intensive courses for SINU staff (delivered by Melbourne faculty online or on-site), a mentorship exchange where a few SINU academics are paired with counterparts at Melbourne for guidance, and co-teaching modules where Melbourne educators contribute to SINU courses (and vice versa) to build local capacity. Another practical outcome was Melbourne's offer to assist with the planning of the Teaching Practicum Laboratory: their experts (possibly from the Education or Architecture faculties) can review SINU's concept and provide technical advice or even drawings/costing for the facility. This will help SINU when seeking funding and building the lab. Lastly, they agreed to pilot a peer-mentoring program for new SINU lecturers, where Melbourne could provide virtual coaching or materials for mentors. For example, a new science lecturer at SINU might be paired with an experienced Melbourne lecturer in science education who can offer feedback on lesson plans and teaching techniques via Zoom. All these efforts tie back to elevating the quality of teaching and learning at SINU. Professor Baik stressed that improving teaching standards will also improve student outcomes and, over time, bolster SINU's reputation. Prof. Aqorau noted this directly contributes to SINU's vision of having graduates who can confidently work or pursue further studies internationally – a point he championed in his public address. The teacher training partnership, therefore, is seen as a cornerstone for SINU's journey toward becoming a world-class institution in the Pacific. Melbourne's comprehensive support signifies a long-term commitment to that journey.

### **Summary of Follow-Up Actions**

The following actionable next steps have been identified under each theme of engagement:

- **Indigenous Knowledge and Research Collaboration:**
  - Draft an MoU addendum to formalize partnership between SINU's Centre for Islands Futures and UMelb's Indigenous Knowledge Institute, enabling researcher exchanges (e.g. hosting PhD researcher Joe Williams at SINU).
  - Identify and develop joint research themes (such as comparative land-sea management or digital heritage projects) and schedule an initial virtual seminar between IKI and SINU's "Living Labs" teams to kick-start knowledge sharing.

- Nominate SINU faculty counterparts to co-supervise or host the visiting PhD researcher and coordinate planning for future staff exchanges.
- **Climate Change and Sustainability:**
  - Establish a formal partnership framework for SINU and Melbourne Climate Futures in the lead-up to the 2026 Pacific Climate Change Conference, detailing UMelb's academic and research participation in the event.
  - Coordinate with Melbourne Climate Futures to co-host a thematic panel/session at the 2026 conference (e.g. on climate–health or community adaptation), and integrate Melbourne's experts into the conference program.
  - Explore co-developing a regional climate-and-health curriculum or certificate program in collaboration with MCF's Climate CATCH Lab, aligning content with Pacific needs and SINU's new climate initiatives.
  - Initiate at least one joint research project on climate resilience involving both universities – for example, a comparative case study on climate adaptation in Solomon Islands communities – and seek external funding to support the collaboration.
- **Health and Medical Sciences Partnerships:**
  - Designate SINU and UMelb focal points for mental health and climate-resilient health curricula to begin co-designing course modules and training materials (leveraging Melbourne's Master of Public Health resources).
  - Launch a pilot Diabetes Care program in Solomon Islands with technical input from the Baker Institute: this includes securing diabetes monitoring equipment, training local health workers, and developing a community education campaign on diabetes prevention using local food practices.
  - Develop a joint research concept note between the Nossal Institute and SINU on indigenous food systems and chronic disease prevention, to be used for pursuing grants (e.g. DFAT, WHO).
  - Engage the University of Melbourne's Innovation & Enterprise team to advise on social enterprise models in healthcare (such as telehealth or nutrition services) that could be applied in Solomon Islands, and incorporate these ideas into the partnership's project plans.
  - Facilitate knowledge exchange in health systems research: organize an initial virtual roundtable between Melbourne health economists/health policy experts and SINU's FNHMS faculty to identify collaborative projects in areas like malaria control and primary healthcare strengthening.
- **Innovation and Entrepreneurship:**
  - Reciprocal Site Visits: Organize a visit for SINU's Panatina Valley Campus Complex (PVCC) project team to tour Melbourne Connect, observe its operations, and meet with its management; likewise, invite Melbourne Connect representatives to Honiara once SINU's Innovation Hub is operational, to provide mentorship on-site.

- Share detailed documentation on Melbourne Connect’s PPP framework and precinct model with SINU’s development committee (covering governance, financing, tenancy mix, etc.), to inform the planning of SINU’s Innovation Hub.
- Collaborate on a joint analysis or case study publication about implementing public–private partnership innovation precincts in small island contexts, using Melbourne Connect and the upcoming SINU hub as examples (for dissemination to regional stakeholders).
- With the Melbourne Entrepreneurial Centre, set up a virtual entrepreneurship program for SINU:
  - Schedule a series of online workshops or guest lectures by MEC staff for SINU students and aspiring entrepreneurs (covering startup basics, business model development, pitching, etc.).
  - Plan a bi-national innovation challenge or hackathon where teams from SINU and University of Melbourne jointly address a pressing Pacific problem (e.g. climate-smart agriculture), fostering skills and partnerships.
  - Explore opportunities for top SINU startup ideas or teams to participate in MEC’s existing programs (such as submitting to the Velocity pre-accelerator or being fast-tracked to the Melbourne Accelerator Program), as a way to incubate Solomon Islands ventures with international mentorship.
- **Peacebuilding and Governance:**
  - Develop a pilot curriculum outline for a Bougainville–Solomon Islands peacebuilding module, co-created by SINU and UMelb academics, to serve as the foundational component of the larger peace education program.
  - Prepare a detailed proposal for a Postgraduate Certificate in Dialogue and Peacebuilding, including curriculum structure, delivery mode (hybrid in-person/online), and accreditation strategy, to be reviewed by both universities’ academic boards.
  - Organize a co-design workshop at SINU (Panatina campus), involving University of Melbourne and ANU experts, to collaboratively design the peacebuilding course content and ensure it integrates Solomon Islands and Bougainville perspectives (target timing: during an upcoming Panatina Seminar on peace and conflict).
  - Establish a tri-university Peacebuilding Working Group (SINU–UMelb–ANU) to oversee ongoing collaboration. This group will define next steps such as joint research projects (e.g. comparative studies on customary reconciliation practices), plans for publication of findings, processes for mutual recognition of the certificate program, and facilitation of staff/student exchanges in peace and conflict studies.
  - Continue high-level exchanges on university governance: as an immediate step, SINU will compile specific governance questions/challenges and schedule a follow-up discussion with UMelb’s Office of the University Secretary. The aim is to seek guidance on best practices in areas like policy development, financial governance,

and academic quality assurance, feeding lessons learned into SINU's ongoing governance reforms (supporting the VC's vision of SINU as a model of integrity).

- **Higher Education and Teacher Training:**

- Formalize the Teacher Education partnership: Draft and sign an MoU or technical cooperation agreement focusing on improving teacher training and higher education quality at SINU, delineating roles, resources, and expected outcomes.
- Conduct a comprehensive curriculum and practicum review of SINU's School of Education programs with input from Melbourne experts. Produce a gap analysis report and a reform roadmap covering curriculum updates, introduction of modern pedagogies, enhanced practicum requirements, and any new course development needed.
- Implement a capacity-building program for SINU faculty: initiate short professional development courses (online or face-to-face) led by MCSHE or Melbourne Graduate School of Education staff for SINU lecturers; establish a mentorship scheme pairing experienced UMelb educators with SINU lecturers for guidance; and explore co-teaching arrangements where Melbourne faculty contribute to select SINU classes to model best practices.
- Progress the plans for a Teaching Practicum & Resource Laboratory at SINU: Melbourne to provide technical assistance, such as sharing designs of teaching labs or sending an expert team to help draft specifications and cost estimates for the facility (potentially enabling SINU to seek donor funding).
- Pilot a peer-mentoring program for new SINU lecturers, supported virtually by University of Melbourne. This involves developing a framework where each new instructor at SINU is matched with a mentor (locally or from UMelb) for regular coaching sessions, evaluation of teaching methods, and support in developing curricula – with the pilot's outcomes to be evaluated after the first year.

Each of these follow-up actions will be tracked by the Vice-Chancellor's Office at SINU in coordination with the relevant University of Melbourne counterparts. Taken together, the outcomes of this visit and the subsequent action items form a robust work plan to deepen SINU's partnerships and advance its strategic goals. Internally, SINU will now assign responsibility to specific staff for each theme (e.g. the Director of CIF for Indigenous knowledge exchanges, the Dean of Faculty of Education for teacher training reforms, etc.) to ensure momentum is maintained. Regular update meetings (virtual) with University of Melbourne collaborators are anticipated in the coming months to monitor progress.

**Conclusion:** The visit to the University of Melbourne will significantly elevate the collaboration between our institutions. It will generate ongoing goodwill, mutual understanding, and tangible plans that align with SINU's vision for excellence in teaching, research, and community impact. The Vice-Chancellor's engagements—from the Indigenous Knowledge Institute and the Climate Futures lab to the innovation precinct and the peacebuilding initiative—will reinforce the message that Solomon Islands National University is forging a proactive, outward-looking path. By leveraging the expertise and support of partners like the University of Melbourne, SINU will be better positioned to fulfill its mandate: delivering quality higher education and relevant research for Solomon Islands and the wider Pacific, while preserving our unique cultural values and knowledge. There is substantial work ahead,

requiring active commitment and sustained efforts from individual staff members up to entire Faculties, to ensure these promising areas of collaboration are effectively pursued and realized. The agreed follow-up actions outlined in this report will guide our teams to actively pursue these collaborative areas, converting dialogue into measurable outcomes. We look forward to nurturing these partnerships to ensure lasting benefits for our students, faculty, and the communities we serve.

Professor Transform Aqorau  
Vice Chancellor

26 June 2025

# **Conversations: Geopolitical Change and Everyday Life in Oceania – *Keynote Address***

**Professor Transform Aqorau**

*Vice Chancellor, Solomon Islands National University (SINU)*

**University of Melbourne**

**24 June 2025**

## **A Reluctant Start – Answering the Call to Leadership**

I respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands upon which the University of Melbourne stands—the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay my deepest respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging, and extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who may be with us tonight.

Reflecting on the significance of land, community, and wisdom, I am reminded of my own journey and the path that led me to stand before you today. It is truly a privilege to join this Oceania Institute forum on “Conversations: Geopolitical Change and Everyday Life in Oceania.” Allow me to begin with a personal story—one that illustrates how the unexpected can sometimes shape our lives profoundly. In late 2022, I found myself stepping into the role of Vice Chancellor of the Solomon Islands National University, under rather unusual circumstances. I had not formally applied for the job; in fact, I had deep reservations about accepting it. My career until then had been entirely outside academia—as a lawyer and a fisheries expert—and I was acutely aware that I lacked traditional university leadership experience. Moreover, SINU at that time was emerging from years of turbulence, marked by student protests, industrial disputes, and the removal of two previous Vice Chancellors amid controversy. Quite frankly, the thought of inheriting such daunting challenges left me deeply hesitant.

It took persistent encouragement from colleagues and friends for me to even consider the post. The Chairman of the University Council, an old schoolmate of mine, was one of those who persuaded me to serve. “*He will provide the strategic leadership the University needs,*” my friend had said when I finally accepted. Still, I recall signing the contract with mixed emotions: humility, a bit of anxiety, and a growing sense of duty. In that moment I realised what a huge opportunity this was to give back to my country – perhaps my last chance to do so in a meaningful way. I was torn between a comfortable international career abroad and the call of home, the call to help steer our national university through stormy seas. In the end, *my heart won over my head*. I chose to serve the people of Solomon Islands, because I knew in my heart that I might never again be given this chance to serve them.

Looking back now, I’m grateful I answered that call. The first days were daunting – I was stepping into a community where trust had been frayed and morale was low. I knew I had to tread carefully. In fact, during my first months in 2023, I made a conscious decision to “*not look back*” at past troubles

but instead to observe, learn, and focus on the future. I told myself: *do not charge in to change everything overnight; first win the hearts and minds*. This patient approach helped me ease into the role despite my initial reluctance.

### **Embracing Responsibility – From Hesitation to Vision**

As the weeks turned into months, my hesitation gradually gave way to a sense of responsibility and excitement. I realised I now had a platform to make a difference for the young people of Solomon Islands – the students and future leaders who pass through SINU’s doors. I felt an intense *pride and humility* at the honour of serving them. After years working abroad, this was my homecoming, and it came with a clear purpose: to give nothing but my best to the institution and country that had given me so much.

In February 2023, at my official inauguration as Vice Chancellor, I outlined a vision for SINU’s future – a vision shaped both by the immediate challenges I saw on campus and by my hopes for what our university could become. I spoke about the road ahead being filled with challenges, “*but deep in my heart, I know that with your support we can achieve a lot... to drive the country towards the 22nd Century.*” Despite tight finances and past turmoil, I felt a profound optimism. We could turn those challenges into opportunities by drawing on the “enormous intellectual horsepower” of our people and by embracing innovative solutions.

Let me share some pillars of that vision, which remain my guideposts today:

- **Ethical Leadership and Good Governance:** Above all, I committed SINU to becoming an “*oasis of good governance*” – a place of zero tolerance for corruption or “corrosion of systems”. Our university must *model* the values we want to see in our society. If elsewhere in the country unethical practices are rampant, then SINU must stand apart as a beacon of integrity and accountability. In my very first address to staff, I warned that I have no tolerance for corruption, especially when it involves misusing funds that struggling parents entrust to educate their children. We in higher education hold a sacred trust – we are *custodians* of the hopes of our families and communities. I truly believe that a core part of our mission is to instill ethics, leadership, and good governance values in every graduate we produce. Our future nurses, teachers, engineers and leaders should leave SINU not only with degrees, but with a moral compass to serve their communities with integrity.
- **Digitisation and Modernisation:** One of the first practical steps I championed was leveraging technology to reform our systems. I often say that technology and innovation are at the forefront of effective management today—a lesson I learned from years in international fisheries management. At SINU, we are pursuing “innovative digitized systems to achieve efficiencies [and] improve the efficacy of teaching and all processes in the organization.” In plain terms, this means introducing a fully integrated digital campus system—from finance and procurement to student records. My aim has been that within a couple of years, all our enrolment, financial, and governance systems would operate under a unified automated platform. This not only improves services, but also tightens accountability by reducing paperwork and opportunities for fraud. A related dream of mine—one that is a work in progress, dictated largely by the resources available—is to see the entire campus connected to high-speed Wi-Fi, enabling students to study from anywhere and staff to seamlessly work from home. I often imagine the extraordinary possibilities if we had all the necessary resources readily available to fully develop these systems. The transformation would be enormous. Embracing ICT and digitisation is crucial for a 21st-

century university, and it strengthens our resilience against problems like corruption through transparent, traceable systems.

- **Global Employability and Labour Mobility:** As a small island nation, Solomon Islands cannot afford to think small. I want our graduates to dream big and be competitive anywhere in the world. In my inauguration speech I expressed a *“fervent hope”* that within 5–10 years, SINU graduates will have skills *“recognized internationally so that [they] can get jobs in Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Asia.”* In other words, a SINU degree should open doors globally. To achieve this, we are working on accrediting our programs to international standards and building joint degrees and partnerships with overseas universities. For instance, I have envisioned joint programs with universities in the Pacific (like USP) and Australia/New Zealand, so that at least a handful of SINU programs are delivered collaboratively and carry dual recognition. We’re also reforming our curriculum – including strengthening English language training – so that our graduates have the communication skills to thrive abroad. Why is this so important? Because labour mobility is an opportunity for our people. By equipping students with globally relevant qualifications, we empower them to take up jobs and experiences overseas, whether it’s nurses working in Australian hospitals or seafarers on international shipping lines. They will gain income and skills, support their families, and ultimately contribute back to our home economy. In the long run, I see a growing *Solomon Islands diaspora* as part of our economic strength – our people succeeding abroad while maintaining their identity and ties to home.
- **Research and Partnerships – A Global University for a Global Challenge:** From day one, I have seen SINU’s potential to be more than a teaching institution; it can be a focal point for evidence-based research that guides national policy. The challenges our country faces – whether in sustainable development, public health, or education – need local research solutions. I have advocated strengthening our research capacity by reaching out in partnership: with government ministries, industries, NGOs, international donors and sister universities abroad. The future growth of SINU will come from *“strategic public-private partnerships with industry, donors, government... overseas research institutions, communities and alumni.”* We are actively pursuing collaborations that bring in expertise and resources from outside while focusing them on local priorities. For example, last year SINU was proud to be a founding member of the Pacific Academy of Sciences, connecting our scholars with regional and global networks. These partnerships in research and innovation will help ensure our teaching is cutting-edge and that our university contributes directly to solving real-world problems in Solomon Islands and Oceania.

All of these efforts tie into a broader philosophy: the role of a national university in nation-building. I have always felt that SINU, as the only national university of Solomon Islands, carries a special responsibility in shaping our national identity and future. It’s not just about workforce training; it is about *who we are* as a people. In one interview, I remarked that leading SINU is *“very important as part of building up our national identity – our sense of Solomon Islanderness – and nation-building.”* We help inculcate a shared identity, instil civic values, and create an informed citizenry. The university should be a think-tank for the nation, generating ideas and critical debate on our development path. It should also be a mirror that reflects society’s aspirations for ethical leadership and good governance. In short, a national university must be both a brain trust and a heart trust for the nation – developing human capital with the minds to drive progress and the hearts to serve their community. That is the lofty but worthy goal I see for SINU in our society.

**Islands of Innovation – The Centre for Islands Futures and Living Labs**

One of the most exciting initiatives we have embarked on at SINU is the establishment of a Centre for Islands Futures – complete with “Living Labs” – which I see as a cornerstone for our university’s unique contribution to Oceania. Let me explain what this is. The Centre for Islands Futures is conceived as a “*beacon of transdisciplinary research and education,*” championing the integration of indigenous knowledge with modern academic frameworks. In our Solomon Islands and across the Pacific, we have a rich repository of wisdom in our cultures, our languages, and our traditional practices. For too long, our own knowledge systems were sidelined as something less “scientific.” I fundamentally believe the opposite – that our *ancient wisdom and modern science* must work hand-in-hand.

Through this Centre, we are creating Living Labs where communities become active partners in research. Rather than academics working in isolation, a living lab means taking the university into villages and bringing the village into the university. It’s about co-designing solutions with our people on the ground. Whether it’s sustainable agriculture, marine resource management, or public health, we set up field sites and pilot projects *in partnership with local communities*. This way, research is not done *on* communities but *with* them. It’s a two-way learning street: the community’s traditional knowledge and resilience inform the science, and scientific findings inform community innovations.

Our vision is that the Centre for Islands Futures will promote exactly this kind of integrated, innovative approach to problem-solving. As I have described it elsewhere, “*by valuing and leveraging our cultural heritage, we can lead the way in climate resilience and sustainable development.*” We want to foster a resilient and sustainable future for the Solomon Islands and the broader Pacific region by drawing on the best of both worlds: our ancestral wisdom and cutting-edge research. For example, one of the Centre’s first programs is a postgraduate diploma that merges indigenous and scientific perspectives – courses like *Solomon Islands Indigenous Knowledge Foundations* alongside climate change science. The aim is to produce graduates and research outputs that are culturally informed and practically relevant.

There is incredible potential in this approach. When we set up a “*living lab*” around, say, coastal management, it might involve local elders sharing how they have protected a fish spawning ground for generations, while our marine science faculty monitor reef health with modern instruments. Together, they test what combination of traditional practice and new technology best revives the fish stocks. This is not a hypothetical scenario – it is exactly the kind of projects we want under Islands Futures. Already, initiatives like our proposed “*Indigenous Knowledge for Climate Resilience*” research have highlighted how traditional resource management (like our *tolo* sacred site protection or rotational gardening) can be combined with scientific insights. By grounding education and research in the *real-world experiences and needs of local communities*, we ensure our work is not just academic exercise, but truly serves our people. This approach also helps preserve and elevate our cultural heritage, positioning Solomon Islands – and SINU – as leaders in demonstrating how indigenous knowledge can contribute to global challenges.

Of course, bridging indigenous and Western knowledge systems is not without challenges. We have to navigate differences in worldviews and methods. But I see that as a *creative tension*, not a setback. It forces us to be innovative and respectful. If we succeed, the payoff is immense: holistic solutions that are both scientifically sound and culturally resonant. Our Centre for Islands Futures and its living labs aspire to be that “*hub for interdisciplinary research, education, and community engagement*” where “*diverse knowledge systems converge to address complex environmental and societal challenges.*” In simpler terms, it’s a meeting ground for wisdoms – the wisdom of our ancestors and the knowledge of today’s world.

I am proud that SINU is championing this approach. It is something deeply personal to me as well. I grew up in the islands; I know the ingenuity of our people, the way our parents and grandparents read the weather, managed the land, cared for each other. To bring those lessons into the curriculum and research lab is to *honour where we come from while innovating for tomorrow*. It also exemplifies the theme of this gathering – connecting geopolitical or global change with everyday life in Oceania. Because what is more “everyday” in our islands than the knowledge passed down around the fire or on the fishing canoe? By linking that to global science, we empower our everyday lives to shape our own future amid global change.

### **Harnessing Ancestral Wisdom – Reflections on Climate and Knowledge**

This integration of indigenous wisdom with modern science is not just an academic ideal for me; it is something I have been actively advocating on the regional stage. In May 2024, I delivered a keynote at the Pacific Ocean Pacific Climate Change Conference (POPCCC), where I spoke on *“Harnessing Ancestral Wisdom: Traditional Knowledge and Practices for Climate Resilience.”* The message I shared with that audience is one I carry into every discussion about development in Oceania: we must not view our cultures and traditions as obstacles to modernisation, but rather as powerful assets in tackling modern challenges.

Too often, Pacific Islanders are portrayed as victims of climate change, helplessly awaiting external salvation. I reject that narrative. *“Why not see ourselves as saviours,”* I asked, *“showcasing the strength and resilience of our cultures and traditions?”* After all, for thousands of years our communities have thrived in these islands, navigating environmental changes through ingenuity and resilience. Long before climate change became a buzzword, our ancestors had *developed sustainable practices* like agroforestry, rotational farming, taboo areas for fishing, and water management that ensured we lived within our means and in harmony with nature.

In my POPCCC address, I highlighted a number of these time-tested practices. For example, agroforestry – intercropping trees with crops – is a traditional method still alive in our rural communities, and it creates diverse, resilient agro-ecosystems that can better withstand droughts or floods. Or consider how rotational gardening and letting land lie fallow was a form of soil management that preserved fertility and reduced pest outbreaks. In coastal areas, our people built fish ponds or used mangrove planting for natural coastal defence long before engineers started talking about “nature-based solutions”. These examples illustrate a key point: traditional knowledge is a vital resource for contemporary climate action. It’s not about living in the past; it’s about weaving our *past wisdom* into present policy.

I shared with pride how at SINU we are trying to do exactly that through our living labs and Centre for Islands Futures. *“I am working to configure SINU to leverage this knowledge through the proposed development of living labs and the Center for Islands Futures,”* I told the conference, *“which exemplify how we can integrate indigenous knowledge with modern scientific research to create resilient and sustainable communities.”* In other words, we want to practice what we preach: to actually demonstrate on the ground how marrying ancestral wisdom with modern science can yield innovative solutions for climate resilience. This approach resonated strongly with the conference’s theme of *“Our Ocean, Our Home: Climate Resilience for a Blue Pacific.”* I proposed that integrating ancestral wisdom and modern science is a perfect example of a holistic approach needed for climate resilience.

What I found moving was the response from other Pacific Island leaders and scholars at POPCCC. There was a real recognition that our cultures are not just heritage to preserve, but knowledge systems

to apply. By turning to our own traditions, we also reinforce our unique identity and agency. As I put it in that speech: *by weaving traditional practices into official government policies, we reinforce our identity and show our strength, leading the way in climate resilience*. This is as much an assertion of cultural confidence as it is a climate strategy. It says: we believe in *ourselves*.

In practical terms, this means governments should incorporate things like customary marine tenure or traditional crop diversity into their climate adaptation plans. And indeed, a number of Pacific nations are now doing so – Vanuatu, for example, has revived *nakamal* (community meeting house) networks for disaster response; Fiji is integrating mangrove-based defences with engineering. My hope is that through SINU's research and advocacy, Solomon Islands will be at the forefront of this movement. We have already started projects on documenting indigenous weather prediction signs, on using local ecological knowledge for biodiversity conservation, and on community-based climate adaptation planning. These efforts underscore a simple truth: the knowledge that resides in our villages is as important as the knowledge in libraries and laboratories. When facing an existential threat like climate change, we need to draw from every tool and wisdom available – especially our own.

### **Navigating Geopolitical Currents – Big Powers and Everyday Life**

Shifting now from climate to the geopolitical climate – let us talk about the changing geostrategic landscape of Oceania and how it intersects with everyday life. As someone who grew up in the Solomon Islands and has worked internationally, I find that geopolitics in the Pacific is deeply personal. It is not an abstract great-power chess game; it's woven into the fabric of our daily experiences. Let me illustrate this with another personal reflection. When I was a boy growing up in Solomon Islands, Chinese traders were an inseparable part of our daily lives. They ran the small trade stores in our villages; they extended credit to families when times were tough; their children sat next to us in school. Many of those families had been in Solomon Islands for generations. So when today I hear talk in foreign media about China's "new infiltration" into the Pacific, I often smile at how out-of-touch that sounds. *China in the Pacific is not new to us – we Pacific Islanders have been engaging with Chinese, and many other cultures, on our own terms for a very long time*. We are not naive pawns in other's grand strategies; we have *agency* and a history of making our own adjustments to external influences.

That said, there is no denying that the geopolitical landscape around us has shifted significantly in recent years. The Pacific Islands have been thrust to the center of attention as major powers – the United States, China, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and others – all ramp up their engagement in our region. We see it in infrastructure projects, in competing offers of security agreements or development aid, in the flurry of high-level diplomatic visits. This heightened attention presents *both* opportunities and dilemmas for Pacific nations. On the one hand, it means more resources potentially flowing into our countries – perhaps new roads, universities, hospitals, or investment that we badly need for development. On the other hand, we must be vigilant: these external initiatives "*come with expectations*" and can create new dependencies or vulnerabilities if not managed carefully.

From my perspective as a Solomon Islander, one of the clearest examples of this dynamic is how different external partners engage with us, and how that impacts our choices. Let's consider Australia and New Zealand versus China, since these are oft-discussed actors in our region. Broadly speaking, one might say Australia and NZ have a *process-driven, institutional approach*, while China is very *action-oriented and quick to deliver visible results*. Many in my country have noted this difference. For decades, our people felt that "*traditional development partners have not delivered enough tangible benefits*" and have been "*slow to respond*" to our needs. This frustration has sometimes

fuelled our leaders to seek out alternatives, including China, who is often willing to fund and build big projects with impressive speed.

In my role at SINU, I have interacted with both sides and seen these different styles up close. For instance, when we engage with Australian or New Zealand-funded initiatives, there is a strong emphasis on consultation, feasibility studies, and meeting governance standards. Do not get me wrong – this emphasis on good process is beneficial. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, one reason I have been pushing to strengthen SINU’s governance and financial systems is to meet the “*due diligence requirements*” of traditional donors. They need to trust our systems before they invest, which is perfectly reasonable. So we do things by the book: audits, reports, safeguards. It can be time-consuming, but it usually leads to more sustainable outcomes in the end.

China’s engagement, in contrast, often bypasses some of these steps, preferring a direct, action-oriented approach—essentially asking, “What do you need built? Let’s build it.” Let me illustrate this with a concrete example. Earlier this year, in April, we visited Wuhu University in China and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with them. Shortly after that visit, we agreed to establish a China-Pacific Research Center at SINU, dedicated specifically to applied research on natural disasters, infrastructure resilience, and sustainable development. This initiative leverages Wuhu University’s internationally recognized expertise in disaster risk management, particularly in addressing hazards like earthquakes, tsunamis, and tropical cyclones. We are already in the process of identifying land where the Center will be constructed, and we’ve designated a local counterpart at SINU to coordinate these efforts closely with Wuhu University. The remarkable aspect is the speed with which this moved—from merely an idea in April to tangible actions and plans now well underway. Now, that kind of responsiveness is very attractive when you have urgent needs. New Zealand or Australia might have said “let’s do a scoping study first, maybe next budget cycle,” whereas China’s approach was more “let’s make it happen now.” Each approach, of course, comes with strings of different sorts – whether financial, political, or procedural.

So, what does this mean for us Pacific Islanders in our everyday lives? It means a new road might suddenly appear in your village built by a Chinese company, or a long-promised Australian-funded clinic might still be in planning because of protracted consultations. It means our leaders have more offers on the table than before – but also more pitfalls to navigate. The key lesson I have drawn is that we must be proactive in asserting our own priorities and standards amid these competing courtships. We cannot afford to be passive recipients of aid or pawns in a larger game. We must be, as I often say, the navigators of our own canoe.

Regional solidarity is one way to avoid being divided and weakened. Institutions like the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) are crucial for this reason. If Pacific nations stand together and “*speak with one voice on critical matters*” – like security, climate, and development – we are much better positioned to ensure that outside engagement aligns with our interests. In fact, I believe PIF remains our best vehicle for collective decision-making and protecting our common interests. We must strengthen it and insist that external powers respect our united stance.

Another strategy is what I call “owning our development agenda.” Historically, external powers – be it colonial governments or modern donors – have framed what “development” should look like for us, often based on their priorities or worldview. It is high time we reverse that dynamic. As I have articulated elsewhere: “*Pacific nations must set their own development agenda and ensure that external investments contribute to long-term economic sustainability, not short-term political expediency.*” This means if a donor – whether Canberra or Beijing – offers an infrastructure project, we evaluate it against our national plans and standards. Is it something we truly need? Will it be

sustainable after the ribbon is cut? Will it burden us with debt or undermine sovereignty? If it meets our criteria, great – if not, we should be willing to say no or negotiate terms that do. For example, we want projects that employ local people, transfer skills, and are environmentally sound. Transparency is key: a highway or hospital must be more than a geopolitical trophy; it should be a genuine asset to the community, built to last and serving local needs.

One area this principle clearly applies is in security and policing – a hot topic since Solomon Islands signed a policing cooperation with China. I have been vocal that Pacific countries should avoid getting sucked into any new Cold War between great powers. Instead, we need a *Pacific-led security approach* that might welcome outside support but on our terms, with full transparency and respect for our sovereignty. Whether the assistance comes from Australia, China, the US, or anyone, it should *strengthen our local capacity* not create dependency. It should respect that Pacific security has facets unique to us – for instance, the role of customary chiefs, or the security threats of climate change and resource depletion which outsiders might not prioritize.

In essence, geopolitical change is being felt on the ground in our islands, from telecom networks to who trains our police, and it is up to our leaders and citizens to steer that change in a positive direction. We have more leverage now than perhaps ever before, precisely because the world's powers are interested in us. So, rather than being overwhelmed by the attention, we must use it. Think of it like traditional navigation: when multiple winds blow, a skilled sailor trims the sails and adjusts the canoe to harness the forces to reach the destination of their choosing.

### **Pacific Agency and Leadership from Within – Our Own Destiny**

What all these threads tie back to is the importance of Pacific agency. By Pacific agency, I mean our ability to make decisions for ourselves based on our own knowledge, values, and aspirations. It is about *who holds the pen* when writing the story of our future. I am a firm believer that the pen should be in Pacific hands. We cannot outsource the thinking, planning, and leadership required to navigate these turbulent times.

As an educator, I naturally see building our human capital as fundamental to this. If we want to stand toe-to-toe with global powers in negotiations, we need negotiators who are confident and well-prepared. If we want development on our terms, we need planners and analysts providing *homegrown advice*. This means investing heavily in our people – through quality education, leadership training, and opportunities for our bright minds. In a recent writing I noted: *“The future of the entire Pacific’s foreign policy and strategic positioning depends on a well-educated, globally aware, and politically astute generation of leaders.”* That starts in classrooms and lecture halls across the region. It is one reason I am passionate about elevating SINU and also collaborating with other universities like the University of the South Pacific. We must produce the strategists, the scientists, the policy experts here at home.

Part of Pacific agency is also about knowledge production – conducting our own research and telling our own stories. Far too much of the analysis about the Pacific is done by external think tanks or scholars in Canberra, Wellington, Washington, or Beijing. While we value outside perspectives, nobody understands the cultural and historical context of our region like we do. I often argue that we cannot afford to be *“passive consumers of external policy analysis – we must become active producers of our own knowledge, our own strategies, and our own solutions.”* This is a call to arms for our academics, our writers, our researchers: step up and lead the narrative. If there are studies on climate migration, why not have Pacific researchers leading them? If think tanks are advising on regional security architecture, why not a Pacific-led think tank driving that conversation?

Encouragingly, there are initiatives pushing in this direction. The revitalisation of the Pacific Islands Political Studies Association (PIPSA) – of which I am proud to serve as President – is one such avenue. PIPSA is creating platforms for Pacific scholars to publish and for research to directly inform policy. We talk about things like establishing a *Pacific Policy Journal*, hosting policy dialogues between scholars and governments, and even embedding Pacific researchers within our regional organizations to inject fresh, local ideas. The aim is to close the gap between academia and governance, so that our leaders have data-driven, culturally informed insights at their fingertips when making decisions.

I also want to highlight the role of moral leadership in Pacific agency. Earlier I spoke of the moral role of a university. This extends to the regional stage as well. We in the Pacific have often taken the moral high ground on issues like climate change – and rightly so. We have called out the world’s major polluters in global forums, reminding them of their responsibility to low-lying island states. We must continue to occupy that moral leadership space, because it gives us influence beyond our size. But moral leadership starts with putting our own house in order. That’s why I emphasise good governance and ethics within our institutions. It is much easier to demand accountability from others if we practice it ourselves. I am happy to say that across the Pacific, we see a new generation of leaders and activists – many of them educated at our universities – who are passionately fighting corruption, advocating for transparency, and leading community initiatives. They give me hope that our calls for Pacific-driven development are not just rhetoric but are becoming reality.

When I think about local leadership from within, I think about the many respected men who provide steady guidance and wisdom rooted deeply in our communities—men whose leadership shapes local governance, culture, and decision-making. I also think about our women leaders in the villages who sustain entire communities through their networks, forming an often unseen backbone of our societies. Leadership from within means valuing these local leadership structures—churches, chiefs, youth groups—and linking them with formal governance. It means a village leader in Polynesia or Melanesia should feel just as much a part of steering our regional canoe as a President or Prime Minister does. After all, geopolitics ultimately affects whether that village leader’s grandchild will fish in clean waters, or have to move to a foreign land, or enjoy the fruits of a new road. Therefore, involving and listening to our grassroots voices in national and regional decision-making is vital. That is something our governments and regional bodies must consciously work on—to avoid a disconnect between high-level strategies and the day-to-day aspirations of our people.

### **Charting a Hopeful Blue Pacific Future – Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by bringing these threads together and circling back to the theme: *geopolitical change and everyday life in Oceania*. In sharing my personal journey – from a reluctant Vice-Chancellor to a determined reformer and advocate – I hope to illustrate how the big picture and the personal are intertwined. I started by talking about my hesitation in 2022. I was unsure if I should step up. In many ways, the Pacific region has gone through a similar soul-searching. Faced with global powers vying for influence, some ask: *Are we doomed to be caught in a geopolitical storm?* I pose instead the question I asked at a recent regional conference: Can we chart a path forward that ensures peace, stability, and prosperity for the Pacific? I firmly believe we can, and we will – if we chart it together.

We have the tools: our knowledge, our unity, our values. We are, as one concept frames it, an “Oceanic continent” – the Blue Pacific – not a scattering of small islands but a vast community connected by ocean and culture. If we act as one Blue Pacific, we amplify our voice and agency. In my country when we fare out to fish, we say let’s “join our canoes” for safety on the sea. Likewise,

regional solidarity is our lifeline in a turbulent world. Through mechanisms like the Pacific Islands Forum and our shared 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, we have declared our intention to take charge of our future. We must continue to invest trust and effort in these forums, ironing out our differences behind closed doors but presenting a united front when engaging outside.

I also talked about everyday life – how a trader in a village or a student at SINU feels geopolitics. My concluding thought is that everyday life is actually where hope lives. It's in the small encounters – a community adapting with ancestral knowledge, a local graduate starting a new business, a regional research team publishing new findings – that we are steadily shaping a better future. The moral role of our universities and institutions is to nurture those everyday agents of change. We must be the guides, the way finders, for our communities. I often refer to universities as beacons, and I truly see SINU's role as being a “beacon of hope” in our society. We shine light on the path, we uphold principles of fairness and curiosity, and we give people the skills to navigate. If every Pacific university, government, and community organization commits to that role, the combined glow will illuminate a truly hopeful path across the Blue Pacific. I warmly invite collaboration and partnership with all universities across our region, because investing in universities is ultimately an investment in national economic reform programmes for our countries. Together, we can strengthen our communities and shape prosperous futures.

In the end, all the geopolitical wrangling in the world matters less than what we ourselves do. The identity, solidarity, and agency of Pacific peoples are our strongest assets. Let us continue to embrace our cultural heritage as a source of strength, to integrate it with new ideas, and to stand together in solidarity. Let us educate our children to be proud Oceanians with global minds and local hearts. And let our conversations – whether in villages or high-level meetings – always include those most affected by decisions.

My story is just one of many in our vast ocean of stories. From a hesitant professor to an advocate for change, I have learned that *leadership is not about power or title, but about purpose and service*. The same is true for our region: Pacific leadership will not be measured by military might or economic size, but by our moral courage, unity of purpose, and service to our people and planet. In these qualities, we can lead the world – indeed we are already doing so on issues like climate justice and ocean stewardship.

So, as we conclude this conversation on geopolitical change and everyday life, I leave you with this aspiration: may our Blue Pacific future be one where our children live in societies that are just, prosperous, and true to who we are. A future where no one needs to leave their islands for lack of opportunity unless they choose to, and if they do, they carry their identity proudly abroad. A future where our region is not a chessboard for others, but a hub of peace, cooperation, and sustainability.

I believe in that future. I can see it on the horizon. And like the navigator elders of old, we will plot the stars and the waves to get there – together. Tagio tumas (thank you very much) for listening, and let's continue this journey in unity. Fa'afetai tele lava. Vinaka vakalevu. Tangio tumas. Thank you.

24 June 2025