Graduate employability
An emerging challenge for Pacific region higher education providers

Govinda Ishwar Lingam and Narsamma Lingam

Introduction

The ultimate measure of success for any higher education provider is not how high the enrolment figures are, the diversity of range of the programmes they offer, the student flow, or the number of students graduating. While these may be some of the indicators, they are still inadequate, jointly or more so individually, to provide a comprehensive picture of the quality of programmes offered by higher education institutions. For example, high enrolment is just one measure of an institution's overall progress and development: the picture it provides of the educational processes is far from complete. The enrolment may indeed be rising, yet the higher education providers may simply lack the capacity—in staffing, other resources and infrastructure—to provide a high quality of educational service to their clientele, especially in meeting the emerging requirements and rapid changes in the very demanding labour market.

A more telling indicator of success for higher education providers is the employability of their graduates in the dynamic current and future labour market. If their skills are limited or too few, graduates are likely to find themselves increasingly unemployable in future and this would constitute a devastating assessment of the quality of the programmes they have completed. Apart from difficulties and challenges with financing, higher education providers are buffeted by major concerns relating to employability of graduates, and they cannot sidestep rightful responsibility (Stephens, 2009). Consequently, continuous constructive alignment and realignment of higher education programmes to make them current to meet the manifold expectations of contemporary times and more so in meeting the demands of the changing conditions of the job market is vital for graduates to secure better prospects for employment in a highly competitive global marketplace (Ferns, 2012; Michael, 1998).

This chapter reviews international literature on the changing conditions of the twenty-first century globalised labour market. In addition, the literature provides some insights about strategies higher education providers have undertaken in some contexts to transform their programmes to address these changing labour conditions. Finally, the chapter highlights implications of the changing labour market conditions for providers of higher education in the Pacific region, particularly in the Fiji Islands.

Taking the literature as the starting point

In all spheres of life—ranging from climate to technology to work—people the world over are subject to relentless processes of change. Alteration in all spheres has become undeniable and inevitable; that change in requirements is also occurring in the job market is therefore not surprising at all.

The rapidity of change prompted Bernie Everard (1991) to propose a formula to predict when change (C) will occur:
$$C = f(ABD) > X$$

In longhand, this formula states that change (C) is a function of (f):
    A = extent of dissatisfaction
    B = clarity of the vision
    D = feasibility of the steps taken to initiate the intervention and change will occur when these factors in combination are greater than:
    X = costs (financial, psychological) of the intervention to those affected by it.

Although the formula might appear to be a gimmick, it does highlight certain crucial aspects that need to be considered, in particular: the necessity for the changes and whether they are for the good of everyone. If, however, change involves heavy financial and psychological costs then its continuation is less likely to be guaranteed. Conversely, if people feel that they derive great benefit

from the change then they are likely to continue with the practices that the processes of change have phased in and with the passage of time, the change will become an integral part of people's lives. Change therefore, should not occur simply for the sake of change. Fullan (1991: 4) bluntly sounded a word of caution against ill-considered implementation of educational change for the wrong reasons:

> One of the most fundamental problems in education today is that people do not have a clear coherent sense of meaning about what educational change is for, what it is, and how it proceeds. Thus there is confusion, failure of change programs, unwarranted and misdirected resistance and misunderstood reform.

Any change to be phased in—whether be it in education or in any other sector of the economy—should be well thought out in order to minimise anxieties and maximise the benefits to all concerned. In this regard, one should heed Fullan's (1991) advice when introducing any change for that matter.

Changing conditions in the labour market

Recent decades have exposed the world to tremendous changes at all levels of life and sectors of the economy. As far back as the 1980s, Lewin and his colleagues drew attention to widespread economic and social reforms, which have outstripped education; these comments are still very much relevant today (Lewin, Little & Colclough, 1983). It cannot be ignored that most of these changes and developments, occurring as they do in developed countries, spread fast and have an impact on all aspects of life, even in the small island states of the Pacific region (Velayutham, 1998). Changes in the conditions in the labour markets abroad, for example, have now flowed on to the region, placing new demands on the higher education providers. On this point, Furlong (2002: 3) has this to say:

> If those in Higher Education are to take their role in professional education seriously, they must work in different ways from the past. Prioritising practical theory demands that universities and colleges find new and creative ways of working in partnership with professionals across a broad range of activities.

Furlong goes on to say that such 'arrangements are already successfully in place, but there remain many weaknesses in the system and much more needs to be done if the real potential of Higher Education is to be realised' (ibid.). What Furlong says applies not only to teacher education programmes but also to all other programmes of study offered by higher education institutions. If the educational response to the workplace demands made on graduates in various fields is inadequate, the graduates higher education providers produce may lack relevant knowledge, attitudes, values and skills for the 'new look' jobs now available. This calls for ongoing adjustments of programmes to ensure their relevance and quality and at the same time to enhance employability prospects for graduates (Stephens, 2009).

Consonant with the global changes in the labour market, higher education providers need to transform their programmes in order to prepare graduates who meet the work expectations of the employing authorities. Continuing to have unrealistic work expectations could jeopardise graduates' chances of winning and holding a decent job. Employers are then likely to question the kinds of skills and attributes higher education providers have developed in graduates even though higher education providers are not solely responsible for grooming graduates for jobs. Generally, higher education is expected to provide general usable education such as knowledge and skills for lifelong learning abilities. Despite this position of higher education institutions, they should not ignore the demands of the employers and other stakeholders such as trade unions and student organisations. They should respond also to the requirements of the employers. Recently, the Network for the Development of Higher Education Management Systems (DEHEMS) (2012: 10) noted the concerns expressed by the student organisation that '[Higher Education] institutions are to be at the forefront in supplying students in their transition to the labour market, they need to be attentive to job market trends and emerging opportunities'. Similar sentiments were expressed by Knight and Yorke (2004) about increased demand from the government, industry and students on accountability measures of higher education institutions. This calls for higher education not only to provide usable knowledge but also to align the curricula to job market trends and to any emerging employment opportunities for future graduates (Ewan, 2009; Michael, 1998). This will then better prepare graduates for work and enhance entry into the labour market and professional career paths.

It is assumed that a well qualified graduate with suitable adaptable skills and attributes will perform a job better, and produce more and better goods or services despite the challenges of the fast and ever-changing global market. Conversely, graduates without suitable adaptable skills and attributes are liable to display substandard performance at work. In this regard, graduates with adaptable skills will be more marketable than those who have not mastered the skills. Development of such skills in the higher education curricula would benefit the graduates when entering the labour market.

The rapidity with which global changes occur, for instance, creates the demand for quality assurance and benchmarking of educational programmes against other renowned or comparator higher education providers, now recognised as a worthwhile initiative for all higher education institutions (Martin, 2010; Stella, 2008). This might involve having external reviewers carry out quality audits of the offerings at certain time intervals and then using the feedback obtained for further strengthening of the programmes. Such changes are warranted in contemporary times for the good of the institutions and of their graduates' opportunities for future employment and to secure a productive personal and professional life.

A small informal study conducted by Tuimaleali'ifano (2007) to determine what a small group of Pacific students wanted from higher-level schooling found that as well as wanting a well-paid job to serve their country, and wanted to become marketable internationally. The subjects also firmly volunteered the opinion that they were fortunate to have English rather than their mother tongue as their language of instruction:

> English being a universal language, was essential to their success and future goals because it was the language of their textbooks and learning resources, it enabled cross cultural and global communication, and it was the language of the workplace. The mother tongue, on the other hand, was considered limited in its capacity to cope with new developments and concepts foreign to their culture. (Tuimaleali'ifano, 2007: 30)

The only criticism the people levelled against higher-level schooling was for not sufficiently preparing students for the world of work. Even though this was a small-scale study, the findings provide some indications about what people want to achieve as a result of higher-level schooling. This draws attention of higher education providers to the need to put in place mechanisms for the purpose of providing a higher quality of education to their clients, thereby increasing their graduates' prospects for employment.

For instance, in Fiji the introduction of a Performance Management System (PMS) to measure civil servants' performance (teachers would be included) is expected to become mandatory in the not too distant future (Fiji Ministry of Education, 2011). The ostensible intention is to increase productivity and deliver high quality service to their clients. In this regard, tertiary education providers catering for the education and training of future teachers have to be constantly on the lookout for changes in the real world of teachers' work. Thus they will be better placed to align and realign or introduce new programmes to suit the present and future needs of the educational workers in the education sector.

Powering forces of change

Major causes of changes include the forces of globalisation and the advancement of science and technology. As far back as the 1980s, Dube (1985) pointed out the magnitude and majestic leaps science and technology continue to make in all spheres of life. These forces have accelerated the manifold changes in all aspects of people's lives, not least in the labour market. Information and communication technology (ICT) is one big change that has permeated almost all facets of life (Ramsey, 2000). Changes brought about by globalisation and the fast growth and development in ICT have led to ongoing changes in the wider society, which cumulatively have inserted significant challenges and demands for the prospective workers hoping to enter and secure long-term employment in the labour market. The chance of securing a job, which hitherto relied heavily on discipline knowledge, is unlikely to remain good for very much longer, as was expressed as far back as the 1970s and is gaining momentum now (Faure et al., 1972). Discipline knowledge on its own is regarded, in contemporary times, as insufficient to secure a long-term job in the fast-changing conditions in the labour market. A result of modernisation is that people are expected to possess suitable attributes and relevant skills apart from mere 'exam pass' qualifications in order to become acceptably

'modern' in their work practices. These external forces, which Ward (1970) refers to as 'exogenous forces', will continue to transform various aspects of the employment sector the world over, nor will the Pacific Islands region be excepted. These forces have an impact on the way businesses, industries, companies and other work organisations operate to ensure better delivery of services to the clients and at the same time to expect their own organisational improvement and expansion. The most significant change is the need for employability skills in the labour market. Watters, when he reported in 1970 that this change is desirable as it will offer better opportunities for the people in both life and work practices, was indeed foresightful.

Employability skills

The term 'employability' is here deemed appropriate when discussing clusters of attributes, as it is more widely used in the international literature than other concepts when referring to certain skills needed in the job market. As highlighted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in their review of international literature:

> Employability is more attractive as a descriptor than employment-related since it conveys a greater sense of an individual's long-term capacity to build a career and to prosper in a dynamic labour market. Employability implies qualities of resourcefulness, adaptability and flexibility, whereas employment-related suggests an orientation to the current state of the labour market. As such, employability has more potential as a term to signal the qualities needed for success not only in paid employment but also in other domains of life. (ACER, 2001: 6)

The employability skills, generic skills or transferable skills are forms of skills and attributes that education should aim to develop in their graduates before they leave the institution to join the workforce. The acquisition of these relevant skills and attributes is essential for graduates not only for the qualitative enrichment of their own lives but also for their chances of securing a job and even of becoming 'more marketable' in the employment sector. Plainly put, in contemporary times graduates need not only disciplinary knowledge and skills but also a range of suitable attributes that complement the academic side of their university education. As suggested in the literature, it is not

only the education level of the workers, such as their degrees, diplomas or certificates, that makes the difference in organisations' output; at least equally important are non-cognitive outcomes of academic study, such as certain skills, values, attitudes, behaviours and attributes (Lewin, Little & Colclough, 1983). Included here are such attributes as creativity, curiosity, independence and social and co-operative skills, which, being highly valued in the typical workplace, should be developed and encouraged. With reference to creativity, education systems in developing countries have been criticised for not doing enough in this area. Such an education system generally, 'stifles creativity, over-emphasises information, neglects knowledge, and shows little concern for wisdom' (Dube, 1985: 67). Positive work attitudes and behaviour are also essential. But what we see is that educational systems are not able to respond rapidly, effectively and in dynamic ways to prepare graduates for the challenges faced by organisations in contemporary times (Dube, 1985; Sharrok, 2012).

In Canada, the term employability skills is quite common whereas in other jurisdictions other terms prevail: in the United States, workplace know-how; in the United Kingdom, core skills; and in Australia, key competencies. As far back as the 1970s, Mertens (1974) proposed a set of generic skills that governments and enterprises considered prerequisite for any employment. These were divided into three broad dimensions of an individual's life: individual development, career progression and civic engagement as a way of enhancing one's growth, social interaction and civic engagement, as well as to attain success in the job. Even though most of these generic skills are driven by the business sector, they are widely applicable in all domains or walks of life (Rychen & Salganik, 2000).

The development of employability skills is not an entirely new thing, as the literature illustrates that many countries in the European Union, such as Austria, Germany, France, and Sweden, and other developed countries have already embarked on this exercise to raise productivity in all sectors. The employers were the key people to identify the attributes and skills that graduates need in addition to the discipline knowledge for effective and efficient performance in the workplace. For example, the DEHEMS (2012) even identified on the basis of feedback from the stakeholders the general competencies such as social and communication skills, job self-efficacy, adaptability, flexibility and team work as a prerequisite for entering the labour market. Australia, the United

Kingdom, Canada and the United States have articulated a set of generic skills framework for the benefit of future workers (Bennett, Dunne & Carre, 2000; McLaughlin, 1992; Werner, 1995).

In the case of Australia, criteria specified by organisations' such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia's *Employability Skills for the Future* (ACCI & BCA, 2002; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) have exerted pressure on higher education institutions to develop students' employability skills as a means to improving graduates' prospects for employment in the dynamic labour market. As a result, higher education institutions have taken constructive steps to develop students' work related skills and attributes in settings similar to their future workplace (Business/Higher Education Round Table, 2002; Ferns, 2012; Robertson & Scott, 2010). For the Australian context, both government and enterprises recognise eight key competencies as important: collecting, analysing and organising information; communicating ideas and information; planning and organising activities; working with others and in teams; using mathematical ideas and techniques; solving problems; using technology; and cultural understandings. Some of these competencies, such as communication, team work and problem solving, are similar to the ones included in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States skills frameworks.

In the New Zealand context a term 'marketable identity' has been coined to refer to the total competencies which the graduate is capable of offering to the labour market, such as skills, qualifications, experiences, and behaviours (Yorston, 2013). The term was founded by Careers New Zealand. Such terms directly and indirectly indicate the importance of acquiring and at the same time being able to demonstrate critical elements of employability capabilities in order to have a smooth transition into the labour market. Team work, for instance, is a good attribute for any context as it will encourage employees to work collaboratively with other colleagues in the workplace. Working together will surely yield better results on the job than an individual working alone. In a similar vein, the ability of the employees to solve problems will enhance productivity and this will be good for any organisation, as all organisations need to raise their outputs. The development of the skills as stipulated in the various skills frameworks would certainly enhance graduates' chances for employment and they in turn would be able to contribute positively towards

the organisational growth and development. Having the desired attributes would help graduates to enter into their preferred job and at the same time increase the chance of securing the job and more so increase their chances of job mobility. (The employer will find it easier to guarantee the job to the individual displaying these attributes and find less reason to 'fire' him or her for poor performance and employ somebody else as a replacement.)

The employability skills could vary from job to job but on the whole they are applicable to any job (ACCI & BCA, 2002). In the case of Vietnam, the World Bank (2012) reported that for white collar jobs employers give preference to employees who have attributes such as critical thinking skills, problem-solving, leadership and communication skills, and team work and problem-solving skills for blue collar workers. This clearly demonstrates what the employers are now looking for in people before recruiting them for employment. Also, it has been reported that those workers who migrate from developing countries to industrialised countries have difficulties getting a job because they lack suitable attributes such as communication, collaborative and problem-solving skills (Herbest, 2008). Such a situation could pose a threat to employment opportunities of both blue and white collar workers migrating to developed countries.

Doing a better job of meeting the emerging demands and expectations in the labour market necessitates some constructive alignment of academic programmes of higher education providers. Matters and Curtis (2008) aptly comment on generic skills

> as being important across the several dimensions of individuals' lives in a changing society. It is not only work and work organization that change, but the ways in which individuals interact with others and with social institutions that evolve.

Apart from the need for review of programmes, there have also been calls for an authentic assessment system to measure adequately the achievement of these generic skills; many of them cannot be measured using pencil and paper or online tests. Teamwork, for example, needs to be measured in an appropriate context.

The higher education systems produce graduates and school leavers who are supposed to have a certain level of knowledge and skills for different areas of specialisation. Their education and training should have prepared them for a smooth transition to their chosen employment. In other words, they enter into the general society for which their education was supposed to prepare them. It is therefore important for employers to know what is being produced by the educational system. The future graduates would then have a clearer idea of attributes and skills they need to possess and the stakeholders and employers would be better prepared to know about the suitability of the graduates for work in different sectors of the economy.

More recently, United States Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan has proposed to implement 'gainful employment' legislation. This is simply to prevent some higher education institutions in making false promises to the students about job prospects after completing their studies in those institutions. At present, he said, 'while a majority of career colleges play a vital role in training our work force to be globally competitive, some bad actors are saddling students with debt they cannot afford in exchange for degrees and certificates they cannot use' (Duncan, 2012). When there are many actors providing higher education, some tend to use deceptive tactics to entice enrollees, such as promising students unrealistic job opportunities. When the regulation is enforced it will require institutions to provide greater disclosure about their programmes of study and the costs involved, and at the same time, realistic information about students' job prospects. Such regulation is necessary to ensure that higher education institutions keep their programmes current, that is, not only well aligned with the job market, to ensure gainful employment of their graduates but also to meet the contemporary needs of the society and the world. Otherwise broken promises will continue, graduates will have difficulties finding decent paying jobs and employers will continue to be disappointed in the quality of new entrants in the graduate labour pool. This is now an emerging concern for employers of graduates from higher academic institutions in some Pacific Island countries. In a recent meeting between the Fiji Ministry of Education and the School of Education staff of the University of the South Pacific, the Permanent Secretary for Education, Dr Brij Lal, expressed concern about the lack of preparation of graduates from higher education institutions in the work expected of them in schools. One reason for this could be the failure of the higher education curricula to keep up-to-date with changes in the nature of work. This necessitates monitoring of the labour market to better prepare graduates for work.

Higher education providers in the Pacific region

Indications are that the number of providers of higher education in the region is increasing. Evidence is also giving ground for increasing concern about marketing strategies various providers use to lure students to enrol in their institutions rather than in others. Strategies that were never heard of or were used only discreetly hitherto, such as active reaching out to students in the different parts of countries for enrolments, TV advertisement of programmes and the use of slogans, banners, open days and roadshows, are now quite common. For the University of the South Pacific (USP), the emphasis is on *Towards excellence in learning and knowledge creation*. The images different providers portray in all their marketing reflect an unabashed stand on qualitative aspects of the education they offer. In this respect, these advertisements are encouraging as they provide some relevant information, attractively packaged, about what the institutions have in store to offer to the general public. However, the advertisements may be short on 'hard facts' about the offerings or may gloss over the realities of service delivery to the clients on a day-to-day basis in areas such as student support services, facilities and the learning and teaching environment. Who knows? Some of the marketing and recruiting tactics employed by some of these institutions could be wittingly or unwittingly deceptive, like the ones highlighted in the United States by Arne Duncan. Also, the increase in demand for higher education and the simultaneous decline in public expenditure on higher education could lead to a downward spiral in the quality of provision (Johnstone et al., 1998). According to Ward (2007) there is pressure on higher education the world over to demonstrate better performance in terms of provision of suitable facilities, more support and addressing workforce issues for future graduates.

In the Pacific region, other players from metropolitan countries are noticeably more visible. Burnett and Lingam (2007: 306) point out that 'tertiary education providers in Australia and New Zealand and those in other developed countries offer attractive scholarships and a glossily presented study experience in their institutions (see, for example, Australian tertiary sector marketing on Australian government television broadcasting beamed across Asia and the

Pacific)'. Budgetary constraints prevent most of the regional higher education institutions from doing this. With limited marketing resources and expertise by comparison to those in developed countries, higher education institutions in the region face stiff competition.

In the island region there are now several providers of higher education. Fiji alone boasts three university-level higher education institutions. The oldest, the University of the South Pacific (USP), is a regional university with its main campus in Laucala, Suva. The other two major campuses for USP are Alafua in Samoa and Emalus in Vanuatu, the bases respectively for Agriculture and Law Schools. Ownership and management of the USP are vested in the twelve member island countries and smaller campuses in most of them comprise the distance and flexible learning synapses of the university. Who knows in future, the possibility of small island states in the North Pacific becoming part of the USP. The University of Fiji (UOF), based in Lautoka, opened its doors in 2005 and is owned and operated by a religious organisation, the Arya Samaj. The third is the Fiji National University (FNU) owned by the Government of Fiji. Its main campus is based in Suva and branches termed campuses are distributed widely throughout the country. The FNU is the result of the merger in 2009 of 6 tertiary institutions, namely, Fiji School of Medicine, Fiji School of Nursing, Fiji College of Agriculture, Fiji College of Advanced Education, Lautoka Teachers College and Fiji Institute of Technology; some other tertiary-level institutions, such as the Fiji National Training Council, have also been absorbed. The establishment of a national university is recognised as a big achievement for Fiji. The country also has two non-government teachers colleges, Corpus Christi Teachers College (CCTC) and Fulton College (FC), owned by the Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist churches respectively. Beyond Fiji and in the region, higher education institutions include the National University of Samoa (NUS), the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education (VITE), the Tonga Teachers College (TTC) and the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE). Elsewhere, too, some larger small states have also established national universities, apart from their membership of a regional university. This, it has been suggested, could become a source of tensions and adversely affect collaboration (Martin & Bray, 2010). For example, it is possible that some of the Pacific Islands countries, having established their own national universities, scale back their

attention to the regional university in terms of funding or sponsoring their students for studies there.

In 2012, the heads of most of these institutions formed an Association of Heads of Tertiary Institutions in the Pacific Islands and elected the USP Vice Chancellor and President, Professor Rajesh Chandra, as the President of the Association. Speaking in this office, Professor Chandra (2012: 2) said:

> [The Association] would provide an important forum for them [the Heads] to collaborate and co-operate, avoid duplication, and promote the tertiary sector as a whole in the context of increasing importance of knowledge as a prerequisite to development and competitiveness.

It will be important for the small island states to take heed of this remark of the Association President, for the common good of all higher education institutions. Collaboration and co-operation provide the most fruitful modus operandi on all fronts in the region and collaboration and co-operation among the different providers afford a good model to showcase. The avoidance of duplication would be a milestone achievement for the survival of all higher education institutions, minimising wastage of the meagre resources. However, on the basis of the author's work and experience in the region, the comment can be made that a measure of duplication in the programmes the institutions offer is already a fact. Teacher education is one such glaring example. It is offered in almost all higher education institutions in the region.

In the case of Fiji, apart from the two non-government teachers colleges, (Fulton and Corpus Christi), the USP, FNU and UOF are all offering teacher education programmes. This is a classic example of duplication of programmes and the quicker we circumvent this the better it will be for all in the long term. The result could otherwise be a situation similar to the one experienced by many countries in the 1970s, that is, a sizeable body of the 'educated unemployed' (Lewin, Little & Colclough, 1983). For the employability of the graduates, the regional governments need to establish a strong partnership with these institutions to see that the institutions offer education of a quality that can help the nations in the development of all facets of life. In the case of Fiji, the establishment of a Higher Education Commission as a buffer organisation is a good sign but more work needs to be done to add credibility

to the work of the Commission, membership from abroad could provide desirable supplementation. Such an organisation could seriously look into qualitative aspects of the higher education providers and mount ongoing checks to avoid mere qualification-mill operation or any other malpractices relating to academic fraud that could adversely affect graduates' chances for employment. A case was reported in the *Fiji Times* (2012: 2 June) about one of the higher institutions here in Fiji facing difficulties in meeting the quality of the higher institutions here in Fiji facing difficulties in meeting the quality of education it promised and also for demanding extra money for a course in the middle of the semester while the course was still being taught. Such comments in the newspapers do nothing to improve the reputation of the higher education institutions and in turn the graduates they produce.

Apart from duplication, many of the higher education programmes may be suffering from a combination of underinvestment, poor quality and having weak links to employment markets. Unless the qualitative aspects are addressed, graduates may leave the institutions still lacking the basic skills and suitable attributes for the destined jobs. Some of the training provided may not even be geared towards areas characterised by labour shortages and as such, there could be an oversupply of graduates in some areas.

In addition, the curricula for the various programmes and approaches to teaching also matter. We see now most higher education providers are moving towards the use of ICT in the delivery of courses, such as online using the Moodle platform or blended modes of delivery. The University of the South Pacific has, for example, many courses and programmes in blended mode of delivery (Lingam, 2010; Lingam & Burnett, 2008). In this approach the face-to-face contact with students is severely reduced. These methods purport to emphasise student-centred approaches to learning and teaching, as they encourage students to study independently and at their own pace. Generally speaking, though, throughout the region, despite the paucity of research being carried out, we all know very well that interaction between students and teachers makes a positive contribution to students' learning. Equally or even more importantly, on-campus life and the constant inter-student and staff interaction, interchange and stimulations are major educational factors that no amount of flexibility can compensate for. The use of ICT could, who knows, act as a significant barrier to effective student learning, especially when lecturer:student ratios are high, reducing interactive approaches in learning

and teaching and also where ICT especially internet services—are slow and intermittent. Poor quality learning ultimately has a bearing on graduates' performance in class and examination rooms as well as at work.

The importance of seeing different providers of higher education producing graduates and their worth in the field of work is vital. In fact, it would be interesting to find out the usefulness of various programmes of study to the demands of work expected of graduates. Even though this is not possible at present, certainly with the passage of time public concern over the quality of higher education will become a topical issue as the providers are increasing in number every year and some are operating without the knowledge of the principal stakeholder. Getting the basics right is important. ICT training and education are vital in contemporary times and so are literacy and numeracy. Poor teaching and learning environments contribute towards low performance. Variations in class size, availability of library resources and resources for learning and teaching are problem areas for qualitative improvement in education. Also, support to teaching staff in their work could lead to better work performance and greater productivity. Too often higher education providers have bold goals but face difficulties in translating them into action.

In terms of quality, Pacific Islanders may not know how the quality of institutional facilities affect the provision of education. Beyond this, the calibre of the teaching staff is another essential ingredient for the quality of the education given. Work attachments as part of all training programmes would provide them useful learning experience and in turn, better equip graduates for the demands of work required of them, as well as enabling them a smoother transition into the world of work (Orrell, 2011). Theoretical preparation alone is not sufficient in contemporary times. Work attachments would provide exposure to the kind of work they will be expected to carry out upon graduation. In all programmes, work attachments are possible and highly desirable to increase graduates' fitness for employment. The use of work placements is a suitable option to bridge the gap between university study and the expectations and demands of work in the workplace.

Since there are several providers of higher education, Martin's (2010) comments are worth considering. A regulatory body and good quality assurance systems

would ensure minimum quality standards, provide recognised qualifications and protect students from bogus providers.

STAR project: the case of USP

As the literature suggests, it is not the disciplinary knowledge alone; other relevant skills and attributes are essential not only to ensure future employability of graduates but also for them to secure a meaningful life. As aptly stated by Delors (1996: 12) 'the view of the Commission that, while education is an ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills, it is also—perhaps primarily—an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations'. In this regard, the USP has responded well to the perceived need proactively, undertaking a major exercise of transforming all its academic programmes under the Strategic Total Academic Review (STAR) project. The project involves:

> a comprehensive, far-reaching, transformational review of USP's academic portfolio, policies, procedures and services to ensure the development of graduates who can take advantage of opportunities, secure meaningful and well-paid employment, appreciate multiple perspectives and live harmoniously with others; dealing effectively with the challenges of a globalised economy. (USP, 2011: 2)

In this regard, the University has considered it important to transform programmes in order to realign them to the overarching graduate attributes to meet the contemporary needs of employment sectors. These employability skills were thought of as equipping graduates better for employment opportunities in the turbulent environment with unpredictable changes taking place at all times. All the graduates need to compete with each other for the limited positions that are available in the job market. Not only should they be able to secure a job but they should also be able to learn new things while on the job and continue to improve themselves throughout their professional careers. Thus they can remain resourceful throughout their careers. All employers need workers who have the capacity to learn to learn, and if such capacities are developed in the graduates then they are likely to learn independently and in so doing contribute positively to the improvement and development of the organisation in which they are working. In this regard the USP's move

to include the development of graduate attributes is encouraging in view of its responsibility to graduates' employment prospects and the economies and communities of the Pacific region.

Final comments

For graduates, mastery over discipline knowledge alone is no longer sufficient in the dynamic contemporary employment sector. The recent surge in attention to skills and attributes of graduates in the employment sector is one indication of the inadequacy. Topping up the subject knowledge with the necessary skills and suitable attributes will enable graduates to compete for jobs locally and internationally. In fact these skills and attributes were implicitly needed earlier but they were not usually explicitly nurtured by educators or requested by employers. Now they are emphasised explicitly in the employment sector. This calls for higher education providers to have strong links with both the private and public sectors in order to be aware of the latest reforms and developments, so that their response to the varying employer demands and expectations can be more effective and dynamic. This in turn will prepare graduates better for competition in both local and global modern marketplaces. Instead of focusing on the training and education of prospective workers only for a particular context, providers should tailor their preparation to equip their graduates to function effectively and operate in other jurisdictions within and even beyond the Pacific region. Acknowledging the need for global currency in the education and training programmes would be a step in the right direction for all higher education providers in the Pacific region.

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