EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

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When discussion was under way for a possible regional education project, the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific, the late Savenaca Siwatibau, was adamant that planning should be the focus. His logic was that Ministries of Education needed a firm and clear strategic document to guide their work in order to improve and strengthen their governance, effectiveness and delivery of education.

The regional education project Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of (Basic) Education, more commonly known by the acronym PRIDE, commenced work in early 2004. Assisting countries with their strategic planning has been one of its core activities.

PRIDE has been able to fulfill that role and it has ensured that all countries in the region have education strategic plans. For some countries, states and provinces, such plans are their first and as such have been met with enthusiasm. In many places, the consultative planning process adopted by PRIDE was the first time that communities had been consulted about their views on education and this involvement was met with profound gratitude.

One of the hallmarks of PRIDE has been its use of local consultants and experts. This has been appreciated by countries as they are comfortable with people who understand their context and situation and who can reflect specific cultural values and priorities.

Education in small island states has its own challenges. Ministries of Education are expected to provide the same full range of services and functions as ministries in larger countries, with far fewer staff and limited financial resources. While multi-skilling is a necessity, small countries often need assistance from outside to provide essential expertise, such as in strategic planning and monitoring and evaluation.

The very small countries whose plans are highlighted in this issue of Directions: Journal of Educational Studies are multiply challenged in terms of human resources.
Evaluations of PRIDE show that the smallest Pacific countries have made the best use of technical assistance provided by the project compared to larger Pacific Island countries.\textsuperscript{1} The same review noted that:

The Ministries responsible for supporting the education systems in these countries each have no more than ten people responsible for the full range of policy development, planning implementation and quality assurance roles and functions. As a result these Ministries are all confronted with the day to day challenges arising from system diseconomies of scale. Capacity within these Ministries is very thin and loss or turnover of staff can have a major impact on the ability of the Government to plan and deliver services. Because of the small number of students, the unit cost of providing many services is unavoidably high. Some services can simply not be provided due to the non-existence of the required technical skills or the excessively high cost of provision. None of these countries is able to train (pre-service) its own teachers\textsuperscript{2}.

Educational planning has changed over the years and continues to evolve. At one time, plans were aspirational documents that were devoid of data or costings. Conversely, there have also been plans that are overly quantitative, emphasising inputs such as student participation rates, physical facilities, curriculum materials and books, but not outcomes. Currently, there is a strong emphasis on monitoring and evaluation. Measuring performance and results is important for assessing the effectiveness of plans and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are now essential elements for any strategic plan. A whole new vocabulary and set of practices have emerged, as planners now grapple with objectives, verifiable indicators, outputs and outcomes.

Education ministries need to improve their management of statistics and the use of data to inform policies. Most countries do collect data, but few use them as a planning or diagnostic tool. In other words, they monitor but do not evaluate. This has been an area of weakness in the Pacific, although development partners are working in this field to assist countries.

\textsuperscript{1} Such as in the Report on the Review of the Forum Basic Education Action Plan and Associated Regional Processes, presented to Forum Education Ministers, March 2009
\textsuperscript{2} Op. cit. p.15
The journey towards developing competence in monitoring and evaluation has not been plain sailing. In a report to the Forum Education Ministers Meeting in March 2009, it was observed that:

There is a lack of an overall M&E framework or institutional M&E in the education sector in most Pacific countries. As a consequence, good data and M&E results are difficult to find and are rarely used for making improvements in policies and decisions. Governments and development partners in the region could work together in a more effective way to change this situation. Regional development partners are willing to find new ways of working together to assist countries’ effort in making further progress towards EFA through initiatives such as developing and strengthening national M&E systems in education.³

The same paper also noted that:

PRIDE has developed strategic plans which lay the foundation for a systems approach to M&E. However, it is clear that an M&E culture is yet to mature in the Pacific. The work on M&E tends to be regarded as work for the donors and not for the countries themselves. The links between M&E, policy development and operations plans based on empirical data rather than anecdotal evidence need continuous advocacy, rather than being a compliance tool. The approach for compliance is one possible reason for only lip-service support being given to M&E systems.⁴

The ultimate goal of monitoring and evaluation is to improve the quality of education. It also brings in accountability, so that all stakeholders can clearly see evidence of what works and what does not. It requires standards to be introduced so that we can readily assess, for example, teacher quality, curricula, student performance or indeed the whole education system.

Work under way by UNESCO, UNICEF and SPBEA on monitoring literacy, numeracy and life-skills will assist countries with the development of regional standards in these areas. The acquisition of literacy and numeracy, as well as the

appropriate skills, behaviours and attitudes, is a sound predictor of educational and employment outcomes. Achievement of these standards can eventually be built into education sector plans as indicators that will signify achievements in the teaching-learning process.

The Pacific Education Development Framework (PEDF), endorsed by Forum Education Ministers in March 2009, states that:

> Investing in teacher quality needs to be the highest priority investment for Pacific countries to improve their education systems. Key specific priorities for many countries in addressing the quality challenge are the development of teacher and principal accountability frameworks and standards and development of ongoing and sustainable programs for in-service training of teachers and school leaders.

Regional teacher standards are being developed by UNESCO and SPBEA in order to improve quality. These standards will provide a sound basis for monitoring and improving teacher performance and can also be used as indicators—quantifiable measurements—in education strategic plans.

A factor to take into account is that education plans now must embrace global commitments such as the Millenium Development Goals and Education for All (EFA). Countries formerly had separate EFA action plans but these are now often integrated with sector plans. The regional Forum Basic Education Action Plan, now re-cast as the Pacific Education Development Framework, should also be referenced.

After a consultative process, PRIDE established a set of benchmarks for national education plans and Pacific Island countries have adhered to these. Countries have welcomed these benchmarks as a set of minimum guidelines for the key elements of a sound plan. The PRIDE benchmarks are:

- Pride in cultural and national identity;
- Skills for life and work locally, regionally, and globally;
- Alignment with National Development Plans and Regional & International Conventions;
- Access and equity for students with special needs;
• Partnerships with communities and stakeholders;
• A holistic approach to basic education;
• Realistic financial costing;
• Use of data and research information in educational planning;
• Effective capacity building for all education personnel;
• Framework for monitoring and evaluation; and
• Integration of Health and Physical Education in the curriculum and school activities.

The 2008 Review of the Forum Basic Education Action Plan found that:

Field tested in the development of strategic plans in nine countries, the Review has found that the benchmarks document has become an integral part of the strategic planning process of the education sector in the region where they are used to review draft education strategic plans before they are finalized. They are also used to review plans that have been completed and implemented. The benchmarks continue to be reviewed, standing up well to external review and application.\(^5\)

These benchmarks are not a static list but can be added to as necessary. Since the initial development of the list there has been pressure from development partners for more robust education planning with more detailed expenditure and implementation plans. This is a challenge that Pacific Island countries will have to address.

Another challenge in educational planning is the inevitable competition for resources between different sub-sectors of education such as early childhood, primary, secondary, technical and vocational and education for children with special needs. Priorities may be set in the broader political and economic environment rather than at the bureaucratic level, reflecting the realities of the national context.

The work of PRIDE and regional and international agencies is in keeping with the spirit of the Pacific Plan whereby regional approaches are taken to add value to national efforts.\(^6\) Regionalism is not intended to replace any national programmes,

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\(^5\) Op. cit. p 38

\(^6\) The Pacific Plan, 2005, p.4, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
but to support and complement them.

Planning is an ongoing process and there is no end-point. There is always room for improvement, revision and re-casting for increased efficiency. Planning will continue to be important, especially in the current economic recession. Austerity presents added challenges and calls for a more efficient use of scarce financial resources without sacrificing quality in the teaching and learning process.

This article has attempted to show how education sector planning, as a key part of the regional education project PRIDE, has assisted Forum Island countries. Further, planning is a dynamic process and the very parameters of planning are constantly changing. There is increasing emphasis on measuring progress of teachers, students and systems, and identifying indicators and outcomes are important. The development of regional standards for teachers as well as regional standards for literacy, numeracy and life-skills, will contribute to more robust frameworks for assessing progress of Pacific education systems.