

Dialogue

Higher Education in the South Pacific: A Political Economy

GEOFFREY CASTON

Unhappy in the Isles of Oceania

THOMAS FARBER

Robert E. Gibson, Educator and Advocate of Justice

KAREN M. PEACOCK

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Geoffrey Caston

My first acquaintance with the islands of the Pacific Ocean—including Hawai'i—was in 1961, when I was a member of a four-nation United Nations Visiting Mission to the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Before we left New York, we were asked to provide our shirt sizes, and a couple of months later in Majuro a schoolgirl presented me with a very ample light blue shirt beautifully embroidered with my name, with the words *Marshall Islands*, and with a sun rising into a sky emblazoned with the word *Education*.

Last year, thirty years later, I wore that shirt when presiding over a different ceremony in Suva, when the flag of the Republic of the Marshall Islands was raised alongside eleven others, as the twelfth member-state of the University of the South Pacific (USP), the first new member since the founding of the university in 1968.

In acquiring and developing their own university, the peoples of the Pacific Island countries have realized some of the aspirations expressed on that shirt. But as the university approaches its second quarter-century, there are still many contentious issues surrounding the management of higher education in the South Pacific. I would like to look at some of them in this paper. Some are mainly economic, some political, and they often point in different directions. By using the phrase "political economy" in the title of my address, I was trying to emphasize those aspects of the management of the region's resources, external and internal, human and financial, that relate to its special political—and not just economic—characteristics.

The countries I am discussing are the twelve island members of the South Pacific Forum, that is, all its members except Papua New Guinea,

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Australia, and New Zealand. Of these twelve English-speaking, self-governing microstates, eleven, plus Tokelau, share ownership of the University of the South Pacific, and the twelfth, the Federated States of Micronesia, has already sent many students and is expected to join soon. They constitute the "region" for the purposes of the university (and for other political purposes also).

These countries cover an area of ocean far larger than the continental United States and are inhabited by only some million and a half people, living on more than a thousand islands. Their peoples have all become poorer over the last decade, gross national product (GNP) per head having fallen in real terms. However, great variations in wealth exist between, say, Fiji, the largest and least poor, with a GNP per head of about US\$1700 and, say, Kiribati, which covers an area of ocean three times as great as Fiji but has only one-tenth of Fiji's population and one-fortieth of its GNP.

Each country is fierce in protecting its own national identity and each treasures the full legal regalia of sovereignty. Yet, strong cultural and linguistic differences exist among them. Some are obvious, such as between, say, the Samoan language and any of the more than one hundred languages of Melanesian Vanuatu, let alone the Hindi of Fiji. Some are more subtle yet significant in the organization of education: for example, attitudes toward traditional authority are very different among Eastern Polynesians in the Cook Islands compared to those of Polynesians from farther west in Tonga.

Educational levels vary widely, both between countries and between the populations concentrated around the capital towns, in rural areas, and in outlying islands. In the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu in particular, secondary school coverage is scanty. Everywhere, even in Fiji, preparation in science and mathematics is generally poor. Although English is taught everywhere in schools as a second language, standards vary and are often quite low.

In postsecondary education throughout the region, there are some 13,000 full-time equivalent students. Almost a third of them are at the University of the South Pacific, the only regional (as opposed to national) institution, and also the only significant one teaching at the university level. The other two-thirds are at some forty institutions throughout the region, half of which have fewer than a hundred students each. In addition, nearly three thousand students are at universities outside the region, mostly in the rim countries. (I will use this expression again: for this pur-

pose it means Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States, including, rather nongeographically, Hawai'i).

This distribution of students is in many ways uneconomic. For example, at the national institutions there are on average only ten students for each faculty member, compared with more than twenty at the University of the South Pacific, where they are teaching at the highest level and also doing research. And at the university level the cost of a student at a rim university is three or four times the cost at the University of the South Pacific for a comparable course. It was recently estimated that the total overall annual cost of all 16,000 students is some \$85 million, of which about 70 percent is spent on the one-fifth who study outside the region, and only 30 percent on the four-fifths within the region.

An economic analysis of this system must ask whether the labor market requires this number of students, or more, or fewer; how they can be paid for; and whether their education can be provided more efficiently. These questions have begun to be addressed in a recent extensive study under the sponsorship of the World Bank. It included a tracer study of the 1985 and 1988 cohorts of graduates from four countries—Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and Western Samoa—and has been analyzed and extended with the help of data from other sources.

Are there too many students? To answer this, we need to look at what happens, or is likely to happen, to them after they graduate. First, they all get jobs. Though quite unusual for developing countries, there is no problem of graduate unemployment and therefore politicians do not have the problem of a pool of disaffected and former students with time on their hands. For all those covered by the World Bank study, the average time from graduation to first job was only a month. Twenty-five percent already had jobs, another 60 percent were guaranteed them, and the rest had no difficulty finding employment. In Fiji, 60 percent of these jobs were in the public sector; elsewhere, more than 80 percent.

Second, a high proportion of these graduates emigrate to the rim countries. The figures are dramatic. Of the 1985 and 1988 cohorts of graduates, about one-third are now working overseas. This is roughly the case for all the countries except the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, where the proportion is lower. Moreover, large numbers of those who had not yet emigrated said they were likely to do so in the future. Adding these to those who had already left, we find that in Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, and Western Samoa no fewer than 70 percent of graduates had already left to work

overseas or expected to do so; for the Solomon Islands the figure was 30 percent. This fits with data from other sources. In Fiji, for example, official statistics show that 42 percent of the managerial occupation group left the country between 1987 and 1990. The pattern is not markedly different elsewhere. Figures for Tonga, Western Samoa, and Kiribati, though harder to obtain, suggest comparable high rates of loss of skilled people: it is a persistent pattern throughout the South Pacific, except, so far, in Melanesia.

Other indicators confirm what this would lead one to expect—a continuing and severe shortage of qualified workers. It is reflected in high vacancy rates and low levels of service and productivity. For example, 10 percent of the posts in the Fiji Civil Service were vacant in 1991, most of them needing highly qualified people; these included, inauspiciously, teaching posts in schools and postsecondary institutions themselves. In Western Samoa the public service vacancy rate rose to 12 percent last year, and the pattern is repeated throughout the island countries. Moreover, in spite of policies designed to reduce the employment of expensive expatriates, their number has in most places actually increased.

This situation—chronic shortages of skilled labor because of high rates of emigration—is unlikely to change, at least in the near future. It arises from the almost complete integration of the island labor markets, at least for professionally and technically qualified staff, into the wider Pacific labor market, mainly Australia and New Zealand, but also the United States and Canada. In the absence of legal, language, cultural, or ethnic barriers, which have largely disappeared for most Pacific Islanders—though less for Melanesians than others—migration from low- to high-wage countries is bound to occur. The fallout is felt by all employers, not least by the University of the South Pacific when it tries to recruit a professor of accounting in Fiji or a laboratory technician in Western Samoa.

So why invest scarce resources in the higher education of so many people who are going to take their qualifications to other countries? Or why not downgrade the qualifications offered so that they are no longer acceptable to overseas employers? The answer is that high emigration is not necessarily bad for the countries or peoples of the region, in social or economic terms. A number of recent analyses have shown the important contribution that remittances from emigrants make to the island economies. In Western Samoa and Tonga, they are the largest source of foreign exchange; in Kiribati and Tuvalu, the earnings of highly trained seamen

working for foreign shipping companies under long-term arrangements make a significant economic impact, a modern way of turning to advantage an ancient Pacific skill. From this point of view, people can be seen as a valuable export, as long as traditional and extended family loyalties continue to operate in ways that ensure they go on sending home a part of what they earn overseas. Fresh emigrants send home more of their money, and are more likely to get good jobs if they are highly educated, so there is a significant economic interest in increasing the supply of graduates who will have a high marketability overseas.

Education is not seen, in the Pacific Islands or elsewhere, only as an economic investment, a means of adjusting the input to the labor market. Individuals want for themselves and for their children the expansion of personal capabilities and the vision that comes with it. For many of those who live in very small communities, this will also involve a desire to travel, to experience living elsewhere, or to migrate. The Pacific Islands are inhabited largely by peoples who, at various times in the recent or distant past, have migrated huge distances. But today the skills and qualities required to voyage by sea and then by air thousands of miles from an island in Micronesia or Polynesia require a high level of education.

The case for further expansion of tertiary education is therefore strong: to meet the demands of the island economies for skilled labor, to maintain the flow of foreign currency-earning emigrants, and to satisfy individual and family aspirations. How is it to be paid for?

The four sources of funds for expansion include the taxpayers of the island countries themselves; the benevolent taxpayers of other countries, through bilateral or multilateral aid programs; Islanders who are prepared to pay from their own after-tax incomes; and churches and other charities, mostly funded by citizens of other countries who have contributed from *their* after-tax incomes. None of these sources is likely to increase, particularly in present world economic circumstances.

Island government expenditure on tertiary education is already relatively high as a proportion of GNP. Over the eight years from 1982 to 1990, for example, the best that the university could achieve was to keep its budget unreduced in real terms. Given low standards of public provision in other areas and low economic growth, this was not a level for which the governments could reasonably be reproached. But because over the same period student numbers increased by 50 percent, it did imply a heavy increase in the load on faculty and facilities and a consequent decline in

service and quality. In 1990, this was recognized by governments, who were persuaded to agree to a 30 percent increase in university funding; in this they were led by Fiji, which was experiencing a temporary economic boom. The increase was subject to a condition, welcome to the university, that it would not be used to take still more students, but to do a better job for the numbers already present. It was a gratifying indication of the priority given to higher education, but I cannot see it being repeated unless there is significant growth in the island economies. On the contrary, there are ominous signs that for some of the countries even the present expenditure is beyond their capacity: in 1992 several were in arrears with their contributions, and the university faced a cash-flow crisis that forced mid-year budget cuts. Only Fiji kept the salaries paid, and only Fiji's credit enabled the university to run its overdraft.

Aid funds also are unlikely to increase. The island countries' biggest supporters, Australia and New Zealand, have attached high priority to maintaining aid to the South Pacific within a shrinking total aid budget. They have also seen economic and foreign policy advantages in building up strong regional institutions as conducive to political stability in the islands. In particular, the University of the South Pacific has been supported because of its role in developing among educated young people the sense of regional identity that they take with them into top positions in the island governments. But I would expect the donor countries, in the face of their own tightening economies, to become more discriminating in the ways in which their aid is spent and perhaps less tolerant of the ways of small island nations that sometimes like to act as if they were big ones. Other potential major donors, such as the United States, face within dwindling overall aid budgets huge pressures for help elsewhere, notably Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. And every refugee crisis generated by the collapse of the Communist world creates demands on the international conscience that make the claims of church and other charities in the South Pacific seem relatively undeserving.

There may be scope for attracting more funds from private sources in the South Pacific in the form of fees. The recent World Bank team thought so, and governments have provided overdue incentives in relation to the university. But cash incomes are, in aggregate, so low that this cannot have more than a marginal effect, confined largely to Fiji.

From a strictly economic point of view, therefore, the best way forward must be to try to get better value for the present investment by rationaliz-

ing tertiary education along lines that will secure economies of scale and improvements in quality. The World Bank team has called for the establishment of a three-tier system of tertiary institutions, the tiers being national, regional, and "rim country," with the allocation of appropriate functions to each. The bank's studies were discussed early in 1992 at a seminar in Suva attended by Pacific Island country officials, which echoed these suggestions by urging the "optimization" of the use of institutions at all three levels. This would involve the replacement of many small local institutions by larger ones, some of them operated regionally or subregionally. At the university level, it would mean the further development of the University of the South Pacific as a regional institution and the diversion to it of a substantial part of the funds now used to pay for students at overseas universities. At Suva the same volume of funds would buy at least three times as many places. Such a policy would also tend to improve the quality of the regional provision, since overseas scholarships at present attract away the best of the annual crop of island students.

Such planning would need to involve all those with a stake in the system, the aid donors as well as the island country governments. It would encounter serious political difficulties. Indeed, the signs are that political pressures of various kinds may force the very opposite to happen, with a proliferation of uneconomic national institutions of relatively low quality, a progressive weakening of the regional university, and the creaming off of the best students to universities outside the region. In the second part of this paper, I would like to illustrate some of these political difficulties with examples from the recent history of the University of the South Pacific. In the final part of the paper, I will argue that these difficulties must be overcome, not just for economic reasons, but because of the overriding political value to the countries of the region of having their own university of high international status, which can only be sustained on a regional basis.

My first example concerns the politics of aid, which affect the possibilities of redeploying scholarship funds to regional institutions from rim universities. Some three years ago, the government of Australia set up a scheme to award a substantial additional number of scholarships to overseas students for study at Australian universities, with generous living allowances and with the full tuition cost paid to the universities concerned. About four hundred scholarships have gone to students from our region, many of them the most talented of their age group. Nearly half were for courses already available at the University of the South Pacific.

Looked at simply in terms of providing higher education for Islanders, it would surely have been a more "optimal" use of the funds to have used them to pay for education at institutions within the region, leaving to Australia courses that could not be offered economically at local institutions. The case was put at the highest levels in Canberra, and most Australian officials concerned with aid to the Pacific saw its strength quite clearly. But the difficulty lay in the fact that the scheme was set up not just to provide aid to the Pacific Island countries. The scheme was not only a matter of foreign policy, but also a significant element in domestic educational policy involving complex negotiation between Australian government departments and universities. The new policy, already familiar in other countries, was to convert a part of Australian higher education into a profitable export industry. This involved charging high fees, which many of the previous customers might not be able to afford. To tide over the universities from the potential loss of income, the government bought from them, with scholarship funds, a number of full-cost places that it gave away as aid. The funds used, though described as "aid," are, in this way, tied to subsidizing the purchase of a high-cost export product (education), produced by Australian producers (the universities) even when it would be in the interests of the recipients of the aid to use it to support and develop their own university, an equally high quality, but much lower cost, producer.

In using this example, I do not intend just to point a finger at Australia. Aid in the form of scholarships is widely offered by all countries, including the United States. It is very similar to many aid practices in other areas, such as tying funds for consultancies or construction contracts to nationals of the "donor" country. Nor must we think of it as a disreputable practice, though it may involve a certain amount of doublespeak in the presentation of aid statistics. These are funds provided by the taxpayers of the donor country, and its own politics may well mean that they will be provided on such conditions or not at all.

So it cannot be assumed that the funds contributed by aid donors from outside the region would be available for an optimally planned system. Unfortunately, the same is true for funds provided by the island governments themselves. If, as we have seen from this example, the allocation of functions and resources between the rim and the regional tiers sometimes presents political difficulties, there may be even more when it comes to division between the national and regional tiers.

So far the only institution on the regional tier is the University of the South Pacific, funded by national governments on the understanding that it carries out those functions that are uneconomic or educationally inappropriate for them to do by themselves. Rather like the principle of "subsidiarity" in the debates about the European Community, this scheme begs as many questions as it answers. Who decides what is appropriate? The formal authority lies with the University Council, on which all the governments concerned are represented, along with academics and lay people. But the council itself is a highly political body, and history shows that its decisions will not necessarily be those preferred by educational planners. Moreover, if it does not suit the Fiji government that a program be run regionally, in most cases it cannot be run, since Fiji provides 70 percent of the funds and the students, and no program is likely to be viable without Fiji students.

Thus, when Fiji in 1983 determined that its subdegree preservice teacher education should in future be run nationally and not regionally, and withdrew its students, the program ceased to be viable as a regional program, and the other countries were forced to make relatively unsatisfactory alternative national arrangements. Similarly, when in 1991 Fiji decided to stop sending Form 7 (top high school) year students to the University of the South Pacific for its Foundation Year program, that program had to cease. On this occasion, most of the other governments had anticipated the move and had decided for various reasons to run their own programs anyway. This was in the face of much professional educational opinion throughout the region that the program was premature in the light of the poor quality of most of the national upper secondary schools.

Indeed, in all except the very smallest countries, many argue that almost *all* the functions of the university could be carried out by national institutions. Universities, like airlines, are coveted as symbols of national identity, and political leaders in all countries would like one of their own, cost effective or not. In most island states, the political pressures are not, as economists would prefer, toward regionalization of more educational services, but toward nationalization of the work at university level, too. In the Solomon Islands, for example, the excellent, though expensive, work of the national College of Higher Education at subdegree training level is to some extent under constant threat from ambitions to "turn it into a university." In Western Samoa, the provisional solution, and not at all a bad one, has been to create an institution, name it the national university, and give it all the trappings, but essentially to confine it for the present to

upper secondary school work that does not detract from the regional university and is entirely appropriate to national resources.

Even in Fiji, politicians chafe at the constraints of being part of a regional organization, and sometimes call for the establishment of a national university, at the same time as their opposite numbers in the smaller countries complain loudly that the University of the South Pacific is already acting as if it *were* Fiji's national university. Fiji's impatience with the university's system of collective governance flares up from time to time in the face of constant demands from the smaller countries for decentralization, which Fiji perceives, usually correctly, to be uneconomic.

Battles about decentralization have dominated the University Council over the last decade. Countries outside Fiji feel that if they cannot have their own university, at least they can demand a bigger slice of the regional university's real estate and jobs. This can escalate into major political crises. In 1990, for example, the Solomon Islands threatened to leave the university altogether unless its Marine Resources Institute were moved away from Suva to Honiara. In the face of this threat, and against the advice of numerous expert committees and consultants, the council agreed to the move, but only on condition that aid funds were found to pay for it. Since then the university has been investing a great deal of energy, so far fruitlessly, into raising those funds, in the face of justified international skepticism as to whether the new location is the right one on scientific, rather than political, grounds.

All attempts to decentralize the university's activities have failed to some degree. The most flourishing is the School of Agriculture in Western Samoa—with which the University of Hawai'i has strong links, supported in the past by USAID. But even there developments have been inhibited severely by its separation from the university's main scientific laboratories and staff, which either have to be duplicated in Samoa or, since not much of that can be afforded, done without.

Other examples of decentralization have been even less successful. The Rural Development Institute in Tonga is to be moved to Samoa to be near the School of Agriculture in the light of a report that demonstrated the futility of trying to run research and consultancy activities far away from all the relevant academic staff and facilities. Difficulties also exist with the Pacific Language Unit in Vanuatu, where three of the university's linguistics staff are isolated from the other two in the mainstream Department of Language and Literature in Suva.

A current example of these tensions can be seen in the discussion of the

location of the university's proposed law program. The proposal first came from the Fiji government, which was finding the cost of paying for law training in Australia and New Zealand increasingly prohibitive—an encouraging appreciation of the diseconomies of education in rim rather than regional institutions. Plans were made for a viable and distinctively Pacific academic program, with invaluable help from law schools in the rim universities, and input from lawyers in all the regional countries—a model of how to do it right. But the program has yet to start because of a continuing and unresolved dispute about location. The council's initial decision was to put it in Vanuatu, where there was already a small law unit concerned with extension courses, moved there from Fiji several years ago as part of the decentralization policy. It has, however, run into two entirely predictable snags. The first is funding the additional building needed. Vanuatu has undertaken to do this from its own aid resources; this was a key factor in the decision to go there. But so far there has been no firm commitment from donors hesitant about its viability. Secondly, the Fiji government understandably has objected to location outside Fiji, which would be sending more than half the students, and which would have to pay much more to support them outside its own country. Moreover, extra building would not be required on anything like the same scale in Fiji, where the students largely could be accommodated in existing facilities, and where the additional burden on student services would be marginal. There would also be difficulties in the teaching of complementary social science courses which are based in Fiji.

There could hardly be a clearer example of the difficulties of rational three-tier planning. For all the countries, it would be more efficient to use the University of the South Pacific than the rim universities; for Fiji, it would cost less to send students to the university center in Vanuatu than to the rim, but very much less than that to send them to Suva. (And whereas the students from the smaller countries are supported by aid scholarships wherever they go, those from Fiji are not.) For the region as a whole, it would be better, both financially and academically, to concentrate staff and students in one population center, which can only be Fiji. And once again it must be remembered that in practice Fiji has a veto, since without Fiji's students, a USP law program would not be viable.

My own view is that any further decentralization of the university's core teaching and research activities would be destructive. It would do little in the long run to build up the necessary commitment in the smaller coun-

tries, who would come to see that it does them little good to house a university unit which is not viable. This view is strongly disputed by academic critics such as former leading USP professors Ron Crocombe and Albert Wendt. They have contended that the regional idea has been destroyed by Fiji's lack of commitment to it and by the university's failure to pursue a more thoroughgoing decentralization policy.

Crocombe and Wendt indeed led the opposition in the University Council to what I personally regard as its wisest decision of the last decade. In 1984, after a deeply contentious and at times emotional debate, it was decided to go ahead with the development of what became, with massive Australian aid, the splendid and capacious library that is now the centerpiece of the Suva campus and has been followed by comparable developments in computing and telecommunications. It was a decision to build up the Suva campus as a modern technological resource for the whole region rather than to disperse the university's physical and human resources throughout the islands. It was a critical choice of direction. Only by developing a central facility on this scale—and by world standards it is still small—has it been possible to build up in the smaller countries satellite libraries and centers of information technology; already, these are developing in ways that excel anything most governments have been able, or have chosen, to achieve for themselves.

Nevertheless, the problem remains of building up in the smaller countries a real commitment, a sense that it is truly their own university as well as a regional one. This requires high local visibility: it is not enough that sending their students to Fiji is less expensive and better academically, socially, and culturally than sending them to Sydney. Rather than scattering the core all over the region, the way forward is to develop still further the university's remarkable distance education and extension activity. Three-quarters of the university's students, counting heads, are now studying part-time in their own country through distance education—one-third of the total student load. In economic terms, these are a remarkably good investment, since they do not have to be withdrawn from employment or moved away from their own countries and families during their studies. They are also the all-important link between the university and its local communities, even in Fiji itself. This activity, though it requires the development of local facilities and locally based staff, can only be maintained, increased, and improved on the basis of a strong academic, administrative, and technological center in Suva. There must be a critical mass

for this; even at its present size it is barely sufficient. A total teaching faculty of under two hundred implies some departments that are even now too small to cover all the necessary subdisciplines that festoon the contemporary intellectual world, and these must be strengthened at the center, not dispersed.

The only conceivable base for such a center is Fiji. The other countries have to accept that this is a necessary price for having their own university, one that will be taken by the rest of the world as seriously as they would wish. If they defect, the University of the South Pacific would be replaced by a series of national tertiary institutions, some of them no doubt calling themselves universities. None of these could command the human and financial resources to be able to undertake degree-level work and research to present internationally recognized levels. This function would soon revert, as in the pre-independence era, to the universities of Australia, New Zealand, and the other rim countries, which for this purpose include Hawai'i.

I believe this would be a tragic setback for the countries of the region. Many students would be denied the true university experience, since sending them to the rim countries would be much more costly. There would be an end to the development in the South Pacific of a curriculum that adapts international knowledge in the natural and social sciences to the context and needs of the island countries themselves. Students would no longer have an opportunity to learn to the highest standards in a cultural environment close to that of their own homes, and to study social, economic, and scientific problems that are those of their own countries. Above all, they would lose the opportunity to learn from and about other national and ethnic groups, and so to develop the beginnings of a regional identity, a sense of being "Pacific Islanders." As Pacific Islanders, they can present themselves to the world alongside, and sometimes in competition with, Americans or Australians or Japanese with much greater confidence than they could muster as Samoans or Marshall Islanders or ni-Vanuatu. The end of the regional university would also, I think, mean an end to the development of distinctive Pacific Islands research traditions and methodologies in various disciplines that are not American or European or Australian, but borrow from them all in order to create something contextually specific and distinctive. The Pacific Islands and Islanders might again become simply the object of other people's investigations.

More generally, I believe that it is extremely important for developing

countries to have their *own* universities, reflecting their own cultural, social, and economic circumstances. I believe that it is possible to combine this with standards that give their students and faculty access to the international world of learning and professional recognition; but I also believe that in the South Pacific this can only be achieved by a regional university located in Fiji. Albert Wendt has described his disillusionment at discovering on joining the University of the South Pacific that "universities are about other universities." To some extent this must be so, and it should be a matter of pride not chagrin, since much of their mission is a universalistic one. International academic standards need not be alien, "Western," or "neo-imperialist" to the South Pacific. They have been shown here, as in many other parts of the world, to be fully achievable without losing indigenous reference. Professor Wendt's own work, among others, is testimony to that.

I have described how the political attitudes of the smaller countries may threaten the regional university and why it is important to them that it survive. I must now turn to the somewhat different kinds of danger that could come from within Fiji. As physical host, and providing some 70 percent of the money, students, and regional staff, it is the only country that alone could destroy or cripple the university. So far, as we have seen, it has been remarkably supportive, maintaining its funding when other public services were drastically cut in 1987 and 1988, and leading the way to the 1990 increases. There would be a real danger of its cooling off, however, if it perceived the university as not giving due weight to Fiji's own national needs, and this has to be respected in all the university's planning, in spite of the temptation to give prominence to the needs of the poorer and more numerous smaller countries. However, there is no doubt that the university's international status confers upon the university, and therefore upon Fiji as its host country, an academic credibility and esteem that it would not otherwise enjoy, and that could certainly not be achieved by a national university of Fiji. At the same time, its presence in Fiji, along with a constellation of other regional organizations, assists in securing for Suva recognition as a regional capital city, with accompanying economic and political advantages. So far, these considerations have prevailed with those in power.

In one particularly important respect, authorities in Fiji could damage the university, and it is one that has caused anxiety in recent years: academic autonomy and freedom. One of the conditions for meeting interna-

tional university standards is freedom from political interference in teaching and research activities. In this, the university has been fortunate. It has been relatively immune from the repressive insecurities of governments, all too often found in developing countries, and not unknown in developed ones. The international composition of its governing body is a principal factor in this: it is much easier to defend a university from the whims of a government that is one among twelve and must explain itself to the other eleven, than from one that has sole control. The preoccupation of the University Council with relative national advantage which I have described has one good aspect: it helps to distract it from intervention in more intimate matters of internal academic policy and organization.

However, this would be insufficient protection if the government of Fiji were to use its power to intimidate the university. Successive governments of Fiji have on the whole chosen not to do so, in spite of occasional, and once or twice alarming, threats. The darkest days were, of course, in 1987 and 1988, following the two military coups, when some faculty members were arrested and beaten, with the university seeking *habeas corpus* writs on their behalf and the vice-chancellor defending it on the radio against military allegations that academics were subverting the state. The frightening and intimidating atmosphere had a most serious effect on all staff and students, and it was very difficult to keep academic work going.

At that time it was quite plain that the military-backed government could have taken over the campus and converted it into some sort of nationalist and introverted *taukei* university; some would have liked it to do so. But the international community, Pacific Island and rim countries alike, had a great deal at stake. The university became a hostage for international respectability for the Fiji regime, and those in Fiji who felt that the country needed such respectability prevailed. The other island countries returned their students, and the provisions of the internal security decree, which would have given the government draconian powers over staff appointments and the selection of students, were never implemented. The university survived.

I referred earlier to a political importance the university has in the region that is different from most of the other considerations I have been speaking about. This is its role in the creation, maintenance, and, in some circumstances, restoration of open and democratic societies. It is particularly relevant to Fiji itself, where there has been in the very recent past a good deal of ambivalence about openness and democracy, and great ten-

sion between the two main ethnic groups. Some have complained that this tension has contaminated the university: my own judgment, on the contrary, is that it is the other way round. The presence of the university has on the whole been a healing one in Fiji society. It offers to Fiji Indians, as to other groups, an opportunity to contribute effectively to Fiji, to the rest of the region, and to the world outside it—without emigrating and without forgoing their own ethnic and cultural identity. Fiji Indians, after all, make up some 20 percent of the entire regional population; they have contributed greatly to the development of Fiji and the entire region, and it is essential that they continue to do so.

But the university has a role in the political life of the region that transcends its position in Fiji. Having lived and played an active part in the affairs of Pacific Island countries for the last nine years, I believe more than ever before that such small societies must not be denied ready access to the universalistic values that are the foundation of academic life.

What specific values am I talking about? The answer, I feel, calls for a slightly different rhetorical mode than that of a paper like this one. I shall therefore ask your indulgence if I change gear and conclude with an extended quotation from my own recent address at my last graduation ceremony in Suva.

The university should always be questioning and in pursuit of truth. A pursuit which is often inconvenient since it throws doubt on existing patterns of organization and technology and disturbs all those in the society who have a vested interest in them. Yet only by such a process of uninhibited questioning can a society advance and develop. This is why all open societies, all truly developing societies, have tolerated and nourished within their midst institutions which are free to question and to criticize, and to encourage in their young people educational habits which question the wisdom of their teachers and their forebears, rather than simply accept it. It is also why we have seen, in the last year or two, the collapse of those communist societies which for two generations attempted unsuccessfully to operate on the opposite principle of deference to authority and to unchanging patterns of thought.

The values for which this university stands—and for which all universities should stand—are also those which transcend politics, religion, or race. It is in the nature of such an institution that its achievements should be measured only in terms of merit. Merit which is judged in terms of universalistic values and not just in terms of the particular community in which it is placed. Outside the university—in the public service, in politics, in business, in the distribution of

social status and of wealth—many societies unfortunately do not reward individuals for merit alone. They use other criteria such as gender or social class or ethnicity or religion or political party membership. Perhaps the most important article in the Charter of the University of the South Pacific is the one which makes it illegal for the University to impose any religious, ethnic or political test upon any person in order to entitle him or her to hold any position in the University, including admission as a student, graduation, appointment to any staff position, or promotion. Any society can, for all kinds of political or other reasons, choose to favor certain individuals on grounds other than merit, and many do, though they tend not to be the most vigorous or successful. But I believe it to be essential to progress in any society that there be at least one institution which certifies achievement and merit, and those alone, and a strong university serves that purpose.

On both these aspects of university values—the critical stance and the reward of merit alone—universities the world over come under much pressure from politicians who tend to take a rather short-term and self-centered view of the factors which make their societies healthy. . . . [T]he governments of the region, and notably that of Fiji, have recognized the importance to them of having in their midst a university which truly recognizes merit and freedom regardless of nationality or race or political persuasion.

The peoples of the South Pacific need such a university for reasons quite unconnected to their labor markets. The planning and funding of higher education must give a central place to that need, however hard it is to quantify. I am convinced that this imperative requires that the University of the South Pacific be vigorously sustained. This is so whatever the balance of other political and economic advantages, and whatever the inconvenience to national governments that come and go.