

Regional Perspectives Research Project – Cultural Protocol

Introduction

This Cultural Protocol will guide the project team's research engagement in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu for the Regional Perspectives Research Project. The Cultural Protocol framework complements the project's Communication Plan.

This research project is about listening to, and learning from, Pacific stories on a range of topics that reflect Pacific priorities, including relationships with other countries.

This research is a collaboration led by the University of Adelaide (UoA) with a team of researchers based in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Australia. Funding for the research comes from Australia's civilian defence research agency, the Defence Science and Technology Group (DSTG). DSTG is seeking to understand more about what matters to Pacific peoples and how Australia can engage with the region more productively.

This research aims to be mutually beneficial and has been co-designed by Pacific and Australian researchers. It hopes to learn from the people of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to inform Australian policymaking and engage in ways that are respectful and beneficial for research participants and their communities. It will also seek to provide a platform for Pacific voices to be amplified.

The project will seek to foster Pacific agency, including the framing of key topics/issues within Pacific experiences and perspectives. Reflecting this, the UoA has (and will further) develop collaborative relationships with Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Australian research partners for the in-country aspects of the project.

Reflecting an emphasis on the localisation, the research will be led by Jennifer Wate and Development Services Exchange in Solomon Islands, and Linda Kenni and her team in Vanuatu. The success of the project will depend on our research partners and the research participants they identify and work with, having confidence that the project is mutually beneficial, and that the Australia-based project team is trustworthy.

Therefore, it is vital that – in addition to the transparency provided for in the Communications Plan – the project has a robust Cultural Protocol to ensure that it is conducted in a way that respects the agency of our Solomon Islands and Vanuatu research partners, our research participants, and the broader Solomon Islands and Vanuatu communities.

It is within this collaborative spirit that our Pacific research partners in Solomon Islands, Jennifer Wate and Development Services Exchange, and Vanuatu, Linda Kenni and her team, are sub-contracted directly by the UoA. This is the most appropriate way to recognise their equal standing with the Australia-based research partners, and reflective of the esteem in which they are held. Their advice and expertise are highly valued and respected.

Local laws and cultural protocols

All project researchers will uphold all relevant laws and Government policies of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu in undertaking the research. With the rich cultural diversity of Melanesia countries, the researchers will also respect local traditions and customs.

The Australia-based project researchers may travel to Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to participate in research activities conducted by Jennifer Wate and Development Services Exchange, and Linda Kenni and her team. To enable participation, the Australia-based researchers will obtain the required regulatory approvals in advance of departure.

In Solomon Islands this includes:

- Holding a permit to 'Enter and Reside' when undertaking research;
- Completing an application with the Department of Immigration; and
- Completing an application with the Department of Education.

In Vanuatu, regulatory approvals include:

- A research permit from the Ministry of Education; and
- Permission from the Vanuatu National Cultural Centre.

In both Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, we anticipate that assistance will be provided by the local Australian High Commissions, given that this project is sponsored by the Australian government.

Relevant guidelines and protocols

In addition, the Australia-based researchers will be guided by the Massey University *Pacific Research Guidelines and Protocols*. This document is based on scholarship about Pacific research practices and a substantial consultation process. These guidelines outline the following research principles that will guide the Australia-based project research team:

- Respect for relationships, including ensuring that cultural protocols and processes are followed, that research participants are respected, that the researchers' approach is grounded in humility, that the roles of elders and leaders are appropriately acknowledged, and that confidentiality is respected.
- Respect for knowledge holders, including ensuring that specific knowledge, aspirations, and well-being integral to the research project. This includes prioritising research partners and participants as knowledge holders and being guided by a participatory approach that seeks informed consent.
- Reciprocity, ensuring that reciprocity is integral to the research project, including that participants and communities benefit from the research.
- Holism, including that the interconnected nature of the physical, social, environmental, cultural, and spiritual aspects of research with Pacific communities is understood and acknowledged.
- Doing no harm and using research to do good, including that the well-being of Pacific communities and their environment is central to why and how the research project is conducted, while ensuring that it is also rigorous and scholarly. And that the potential research outcomes and impact benefit our Pacific research partners, research participants, and Pacific communities more broadly.

The Australia-based project researchers will also be guided by the second edition of the *Cultural Etiquette in the Pacific Islands* handbook developed for staff of the Pacific Community who work in Pacific communities. This handbook provides guidance on topics such as:

- leadership protocols;
- engagement and relationship-building;
- ceremonies and religious beliefs;
- appropriate dress;
- how to behave in peoples' homes; and
- norms and cultural nuances governing everyday behaviour.

Socialisation of the project

As a Government of Australia-sponsored project, and given existing sensitivities associated with AUKUS and the China/Solomon Islands security agreement, care will be taken to socialise the project with key stakeholders.

It is important that the project is introduced to key stakeholders (relevant Government bodies and institutions, chiefs and church leaders, civil organisations including youth and women's groups) of both Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to demonstrate respect of their sovereignty and recognition of formal protocols. This is standard practice and is even more crucial in the current climate. Transparency will be key in fostering trustful relationships which is crucial to the success of the project. It also mitigates misinformation which is one of the potential core risks of the project.

Key stakeholders will include Heads of Missions of both countries in Canberra and relevant organisations and communities in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. This also provides valuable opportunities to test assumptions of the local context and foster enduring relationships.

The accompanying Communications Plan outlines strategies for engaging with key stakeholders across all levels of the project.

Currency

This is a living document and will be revised during implementation of the project to ensure it remains relevant and is fit-for-purpose.

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