

DESK STUDY FOR THE EVALUATION OF THE COOK ISLANDS EDUCATION SECTOR SUPPORT BUDGET SUPPORT GRANT FUNDING ARRANGEMENT

BACKGROUND

The Education Sector Budget Support provides a Grant Funding Arrangement (GFA) to the Cook Islands Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Finance and Economic Management (MFEM). Support provided aims to contribute 'to the implementation of the strategic and operational plans of MOE.' Signed in July of 2012, the GFA made NZ \$9,525,000 available to the MOE in the three years to June 2015.

The evaluation involved a desk study of relevant documents and reports and phone interviews with key stakeholders. It covered all outputs and related activities supported by the GFA, specifically those outlined in the Results Measurement Table (RMT). The period from July 2012 to October 2014 was encompassed.

WHAT IS WORKING WELL?

The evaluation found that funding has contributed directly to the achievement of the MOE's Business Plans, Statement of Intent and the Cook Islands Education Master Plan 2008-2023 (EMP). In turn the EMP is aligned to Cook Islands national goals as stated in the National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP) 2011-2015.

Education sector support activities have contributed to the effectiveness of the Cook Islands education system. The report concludes that these activities have, to a significant extent, led to desired outcomes. For example, activities aimed at ensuring all children have completed basic education have provided additional support for students with special needs, and increased the capacity for pastoral care and guidance at secondary schools on Rarotonga and Aitutaki. Te Kura Uira (the online school) is innovative, increasing outer island students' access to a wider range of learning and providing the potential to improve learning outcomes. Short term performance data already shows that significant progress has been achieved.

According to the report, funding was used to support activities agreed in the GFA. Funding was largely targeted to operating costs with a small proportion supporting salary supplementation as a means to improving teacher retention.

Outputs and related activities contributed to progressing the short and medium term outcomes sought under the arrangement. This included a significant number of activities to improve teacher qualifications, provide targeted professional development and support teacher practice. While it is difficult to attribute student outcomes directly to teacher performance it is clear that better trained principals and teachers contribute to more effective teaching pedagogy and improved student achievement.

The evaluation concluded that if the GFA was not in place, current activities could not be sustained or progress to achieve desired outcomes maintained without a commensurate increase in budget from Cook Island Government (CIG) or other sources.

WHAT IMPROVEMENTS COULD BE MADE?

The evaluation suggested enhancement or refocusing of outputs and activities in the following areas could lead to more sustainable outcomes in the future:

- Ensuring long term sustainability of tertiary vocational and education training (TVET) by developing more cost effective options, and maintaining the Cook Islands Tertiary Training Institute's accreditation with international qualifications authorities.
- An increased focus on providing a diverse subject range and education pathways for senior secondary students (particularly males) is likely to help improve retention.
- The success of Te Kura Uira has shown that ICT integration can play a critical role in enhancing learning outcomes. However, the full benefits of ICT integration will not be realised until ICT infrastructure improvements can address related connectivity and cost challenges.

Overall education sector costs are increasing as a result of a wide range of factors including:

- recent legislative changes that increased the age range of compulsory education
- recent adjustments to staff remuneration
- the cost of ICT integration and
- the lack of economies of scale (particularly in the outer islands).
- The evaluation noted that previous research found that CIG funding to the sector is not, on its own, adequate to maintain and further achieve the EMP objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommended continued support for the education sector with the RMT to be reviewed and revised to develop measureable indicators for outputs and to reflect changes in the tertiary sector. It also recommended closer alignment between MOE focus areas and those areas reported in the RMT.

It was recommended that CIG consider changes to staff employment conditions to encourage staff to stay and continue to be employed by the MOE. Seven priority areas for funding under the GFA were recommended in the report.

OUR RESPONSE

MFAT has used evaluation findings to inform the development of a new Performance-Based Budget Support arrangement with the CIG. Under the arrangement, New Zealand will provide the CIG with funding to advance the delivery of its education, health, tourism and public service strategies and plans.

As a budget support arrangement, the CIG has full ownership over the allocation of this funding to the above sectors. New Zealand will use high level policy dialogues to encourage the CIG to progressively increase its own resourcing to these sectors (including education), to implement broader public sector reforms and, where appropriate, draw on New Zealand's expertise to help ensure efficient and effective outcomes are achieved.

DETAILS ABOUT THE EVALUATION

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