

Pacific Youth Engagement, Empowerment and Economic Pathways Evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pacific Youth Engagement, Empowerment and Economic Pathways (PYEEEP) pilot has demonstrated a credible and context-responsive model for addressing the challenge of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) in the Pacific. Implemented by the Pacific Community (SPC) with funding from the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), PYEEEP connects disengaged young people with tailored pathways into technical and vocational training, internships and small-enterprise opportunities. The model has proven that with the right supports, youth who were previously excluded from the formal economy can transition into productive livelihoods and civic roles.

PYEEEP's strength lies in its local ownership and design. The program was developed through community profiling and validation workshops, aligning closely with the Pacific Youth Development Framework (PYDF 2014–2023), national youth policies in Tonga and Solomon Islands, and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. By building on existing institutions and systems, rather than creating parallel structures, PYEEEP has demonstrated that youth inclusion and employment outcomes can be achieved through national delivery platforms when they are accompanied by flexible, youth-centred support.

1. Relevance

PYEEEP is highly relevant by design, aligning with regional frameworks (Pacific Youth Development Framework, 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific), national youth priorities, and MFAT's inclusive development priorities. It lowered barriers for Youth NEET, offering inclusive, context-appropriate pathways that match youth aspirations and labour needs.

In Tonga and Solomon Islands, the selected pilot pathways (aged care, hospitality, electrical, and textiles/life skills) reflected both labour-market demand and youth goals identified through national profiling exercises. Stakeholders consistently described PYEEEP as a “bridge” between traditional training and real-world employment. Ministries, training institutions, and employers recognised its value in demonstrating practical, inclusive approaches to youth engagement. At a regional level, PYEEEP was showcased at the 2024 Senior Officials Meeting and Pacific Ministers for Youth Meeting, re-positioning youth pathways on the policy agenda and reinforcing SPC's leadership in this area.

2. Effectiveness

PYEEEP effectively improved the employability, confidence, and leadership of NEET youth, with many families also observing tangible contributions to household wellbeing. Wrap-around support proved decisive for completion, transforming experiences of exclusion into a “second chance to dream.”

Approximately a quarter of graduates from Cohort 1 obtained paid work following training, while others progressed to further study or small-enterprise activities. Employers cited positive changes in discipline and professionalism and expressed willingness to host future interns. Families reported greater household stability, improved communication, and a renewed sense of purpose among youth members. Surveys and interviews showed strong agreement that participants felt better prepared for work, more capable of managing stress, and more confident in contributing to their families and communities.

PYEEEP's inclusive design reached groups traditionally excluded from formal training such as young mothers, rural youth, and those with disabilities through practical measures such as flexible scheduling and psychosocial support. Crucially, these wrap-around supports, including stipends, transport and childcare

allowances, counselling, and mentoring, proved essential to retention and completion, particularly for youth facing economic or caregiving pressures. Partners emphasised that these supports were not peripheral but integral to program success.

At the systems level, PYEEEP strengthened coordination among ministries and institutions. Technical Working Groups and National Steering Committees became active platforms for cross-sector dialogue, helping to institutionalise youth pathways and promote shared accountability for outcomes.

3. Value for Money

PYEEEP converted relatively high per-youth investment into strong completion rates and early employment outcomes, showing that intensive wraparound supports, though small, delivered disproportionate value for retention and inclusion. Efficiency is expected to improve across larger cohorts, co-financing, and pathway efficiencies.

While the cost per graduate (NZD 13,003) is higher than mainstream TVET averages, it sits well below regional schemes such as the Australia-Pacific Technical College (APTC) and represents a “high-support, medium-cost” model that achieved disproportionate value for inclusion and retention. Two-thirds of expenditure directly benefitted training institutions and youth through tuition, stipends, materials and support services. Not unexpected for a pilot program, cost-efficiency is expected to improve under scaled delivery as curricula are reused, governance functions streamlined, and fixed costs spread across larger cohorts. Stakeholders also highlighted operational efficiencies achieved through partnerships: employers hosting interns on a cost-free basis, Chambers of Commerce facilitating placements, and ministries providing in-kind support and venues. These contributions demonstrate effective leveraging of existing systems and resources.

4. Impact

PYEEEP is changing perceptions: employers and TVET providers now see NEET youth as assets, and governments are moving from passive supporters to co-leaders. Evidence of intergenerational benefits with graduates’ success boosting family morale, financial contributions, and siblings’ education prospects.

Beyond immediate employment outcomes, employers and ministries reported a shift from viewing NEET youth as “unreliable” to recognising them as valuable contributors. Youth were also invited to national policy fora and steering bodies, signalling increased civic participation and visibility. Several ministries have since integrated PYEEEP principles into national employment and apprenticeship discussions, and SPC’s advocacy has informed new regional initiatives such as the proposed Pacific Youth Development Pathway endorsed in 2024. Early evidence suggests PYEEEP contributed to a wider narrative of youth empowerment in the region, helping governments and implementing partners move from isolated training projects toward integrated, rights-based youth pathways.

5. Sustainability

National Steering Committees and government co-leadership are functioning, with Solomon Islands already signalling a commitment to co-finance. However, the model is resource-intensive, and sustaining outcomes will require adaptation and budget realism to maintain wrap-around supports.

Government ownership is evident through coordination and policy engagement rather than fiscal transfers, which is appropriate at this pilot stage. The Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs has begun allocating staff and operational resources to the pathways, while Tonga’s Ministry of Internal Affairs has led coordination and participant selection.

Institutional sustainability is also emerging through strengthened capacity of partner training institutions, which have adopted PYEEEP modules and inclusive practices. Continued technical assistance will be required to maintain quality and ensure that wrap-around supports and counselling services can be sustained.

6. Scalability and Learning

PYEEEP has proven a viable, youth-centred model with strong potential for adaptation, but scaling must be phased, affordable, and rooted in government ownership to avoid diluting quality. The priority now is to consolidate lessons from the pilots, expand strategically into rural-relevant pathways, and embed equity budgets to avoid excluding vulnerable youth.

PYEEEP has established a strong foundation for expansion, supported by national ownership, functioning governance structures, and demonstrated early outcomes. The evaluation finds that scaling will depend on several enabling conditions: sustained political commitment, predictable financing for wrap-around supports, continued SPC technical assistance, and strengthened systems for employer engagement, monitoring and quality assurance. Partner training institutions and active National Steering Committees provide a practical base for gradual scale-up.

Stakeholders favour a phased approach, beginning with consolidation and quality improvement in Tonga and Solomon Islands before extending to new sectors such as carpentry, agriculture or digital skills or adapting the model to other Pacific contexts. Integration within existing TVET and ministry systems, rather than creating parallel structures, is seen as the most feasible and cost-efficient pathway.

Key risks include overstressing institutional capacity, loss of youth-centred quality as cohorts grow, and uncertainty over financing for essential supports such as counselling, transport and stipends. Without careful sequencing and shared resourcing, scale could compromise inclusion and delivery standards.

Strong partnerships remain PYEEEP's main asset for sustainable growth. Collaboration between SPC, MFAT, governments, Chambers of Commerce and training institutions has created trust, alignment and policy traction. These relationships, combined with SPC's regional convening role, position PYEEEP as a practical model for youth employment that can inform future investment across the Pacific.

A total of 14 recommendations are detailed in the report that build on the findings of this evaluation and are intended to guide the future direction of PYEEEP and related youth programming across the Pacific. These recommendations are further summarised here;

1. **Consolidate before expanding.** Strengthen implementation quality, monitoring, and coordination in Tonga and Solomon Islands before replication elsewhere.
2. **Embed pathways within national systems.** Transition PYEEEP functions, such as counselling, internships, and stipends, into ministry and TVET frameworks supported by clear policy agreements.
3. **Formalise employer partnerships.** Create structured industry engagement mechanisms to improve job matching, curriculum alignment, and pathways to ongoing employment.
4. **Enhance entrepreneurship components.** Introduce seed-funding, mentorship, and business incubation for youth aspiring to self-employment, particularly in rural sectors such as agriculture and trades.
5. **Strengthen evidence and MEL systems.** Implement simple tracer studies and integrated data collection across cohorts to track employment, earnings, and training outcomes.
6. **Plan for financial sustainability.** Develop a hybrid financing model combining government budget lines, private-sector contributions, and donor support to maintain essential wrap-around services.
7. **Promote peer learning and regional uptake.** Continue to document and share lessons through SPC's regional platforms, including toolkits and policy briefs for replication across Pacific Island Countries.