

Industry-based Training models in the Solomon Islands

The current state and potential for application

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Introduction

This brief is a summary of the national findings for the Solomon Islands from the *Construction Sector Industry-based Training in the Pacific* research commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and carried out by the Skills Consulting Group. The focus of the research was on the current state of industry training in 6 Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and its likely impact on the implementation of industry training in the Pacific construction sector.

The findings for the Solomon Islands are summarised in four areas:

- The models of industry training currently being delivered in the Solomon Islands and its construction sector.
- The level and scope of skills demand in the Solomon Islands which drives the need for Industry Training.
- The barriers to implementation of industry training in the Solomon Islands.
- The development needs for the Solomon Islands to enable successful industry training models.

The research was carried out between May and August 2021 using a combination of desk-based and field research. Field research involved semi-structured interviews with stakeholders of industry training in the selected PICs. These included government representatives; education and training providers; employers and industry representatives; and community and voluntary organisations where appropriate.

Industry Training in The Solomon Islands and its Construction Sector

The Solomon Islands provides some industry training in the construction sector through a national trades certification system.

The National Trade Testing, Training, & Certification Unit (NTTTU) within the Labour Division of The Ministry of Commerce, Industry, Labour and Immigration (MCILI) offers trades training as well as national trade certification. The trade certification is based upon a National Trades Testing and Training Certificate (NTTTC) that is outcomes-based and multi-levelled.

Stakeholders from the field research reported that approximately 12,000 have graduated from the NTTTC since 1981 and that certificate holders have a strong presence in the construction sector. The certification, in principle, defines a set of national skills standards for construction workers, however NTTTC assessments are derived from ILO defined skill sets, not by local industry.

To administer the NTTTC standards, the NTTTU oversees both apprenticeships in the formal sector and trades testing in the informal sector.

INDUSTRY TRAINING

A mode of learning where learners develop competence mostly through the workplace, however, develop some complementary knowledge sets, skills, or competence outside of the workplace.

In the formal sector apprenticeship scheme, apprenticeships have off-job training provided by an accredited education institution along with workplace learning. The coordination of these apprenticeships is transitioning to a newly established entity: the Solomon Islands Tertiary Education and Skills Authority (SITESA, established 2019). In these arrangements, the education institutions are tasked with assessing both off-job and on-job components. Apprentices enter contracts with workplaces, these contracts define their rights and the employment responsibilities of stakeholders. The NTTTTU also facilitates placement of apprentices into workplaces, manages partnerships with formal training institutions, and is responsible for regulation and monitoring of an apprentice's training.

The NTTTTU has an Industry Standards Advisory Group (ISAG) designed to facilitate partnership between industries, training institutions, and the government's Labour division. However, stakeholders noted that this mechanism lacks policy guidance and is seen as ineffective.

Crucially, it is unclear of the respective proportions of an apprentices learning is delivered between on-job and off-job training. It is also unclear whether outcomes-driven workplace learning and assessment is used, or if apprenticeships are more loosely structured workplace experiences based on time-served.

Prior to the reforms, the government owned Solomon Islands National University (SINU) was the only provider allowed to offer apprenticeships as a part of their programmes. Now, other formal institutions can offer apprenticeships if they meet certain minimum standards for institutional quality. However, due to regulatory system changes and the establishment of SITESA, training providers have been given interim recognition for apprenticeship programmes while they prepare for initial reviews. Currently no other education providers are offering the apprenticeships. SITESA is still establishing its capacity, so it is uncertain when these provisional arrangements will change.

SINU is the largest formal construction skills provider in the Solomon Islands. It was established in 2013 through the combination of several tertiary education institutes. These were the Solomon Islands Teachers College, Public Administration Training School, Ranadi Marine Training School, Honiara Nursing Training school, and Honiara Technical Institute. Further growth has seen SINU's scope of programmes increase and it now offers a wide range of technical and non-technical programmes. Construction courses at SINU include Carpentry, Joinery, Plumbing, and Electrical with a new Construction (Steel, concrete, civil works, etc) programme under development. These courses have integrated apprenticeships. It is not clear what ratio of on-job to off-job training is offered in these programmes.

SINU also offer short courses in the construction trades. These can be delivered at provincial level through partnerships with Rural Training Centres (RTCs) or through SINU centres to increase access to skills training. Funding for these courses comes from employers and/or employees.

In informal settings, the NTTTTU specifies skills standards for non-accredited providers, such as RTCs and Community-based training centres to underpin programme design and assessment. The latter can be used to demonstrate that learners meet the requirements of the national NTTTTC certification. Further, the NTTTTC testing may also be provided to workers who have not been through any formal training. This is a useful tool for skills recognition and the empowerment of the informal workforce.

Large employers are involved in providing employees opportunities to take in-house programmes, although these are not accredited. Employers handle on-job skills formation and, in some instances, send their employees for block courses to develop off-job skills. Stakeholders reported that, typically, employees in these arrangements will be sent to SINU or APTC. It is also common for employers to bring in international experts for skills training with their staff. Some employers are sending their employees overseas for longer-term skills development.

Formal construction skills training is also provided by a range of education and training providers beyond SINU. The most numerous are the Rural Training Centres (RTCs) with approximately 60-70 providers, mostly owned by churches. Community-based training centres also provide non-accredited construction skills development relevant to local communities. These can cover skills such as: basic infrastructure maintenance; rural water supply and hygiene services; and specific equipment training to enable and empower more remote communities to maintain their infrastructure. Other notable training institutions within the Solomon Islands are Don Bosco and APTC.

Quality assurance of providers and programmes is managed by SITESA, though SITESA has wider strategic functions as well. NTTTTU provides some regulation of apprentices and workplaces offering apprenticeships. However, as SITESA's is still building capacity and capability in Work-based Learning, the relationships and workflows between SITESA and MCILI roles are yet to mature with resulting inconsistencies and inefficiencies in delivery.

Work is underway to have SINU align with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) although the Solomon Islands has a national qualifications framework, referenced against the Pacific Qualifications Framework (PQF) (USP and Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018).

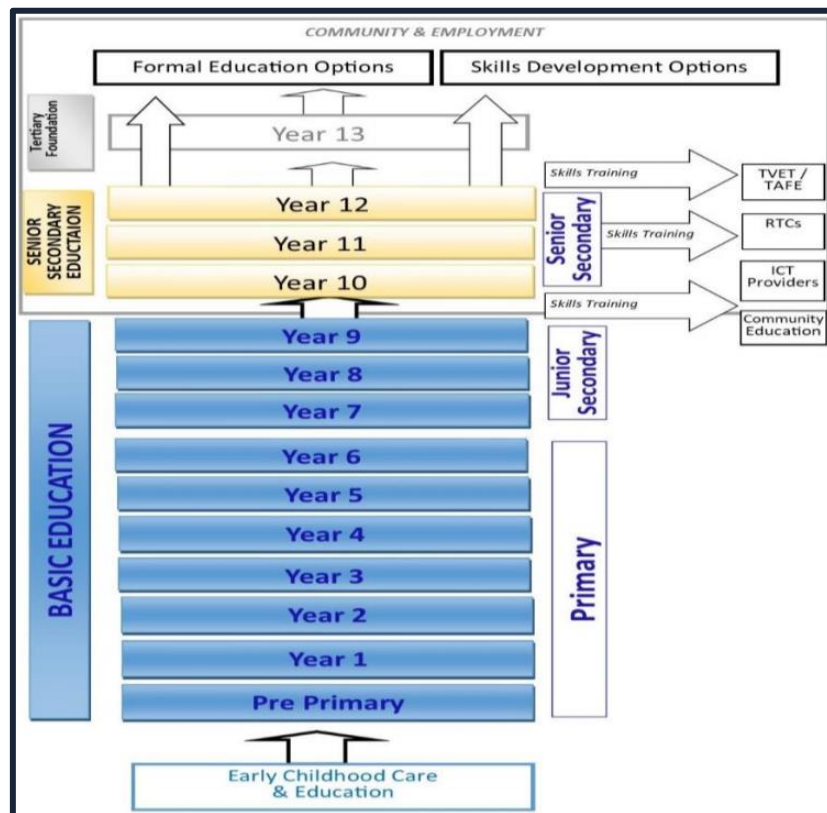


Figure 1: Solomon Islands Education Pathways.

Source: Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development Annual Report, (Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, 2019).

Construction Skills Landscape

In the Solomon Islands, all stakeholders described a growing demand for skilled workers. The position on semi-skilled workers was less clear. Critically, while there is growing demand for skilled

labour, job opportunities in the construction sector are shrinking. Providers are finding it harder to place graduates from their construction skills programmes into employment.

Greater understanding of construction skills demand is needed, particularly quantitative assessments. Undersupplied and oversupplied skills identified by stakeholders are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Identified undersupplied and oversupplied construction skills in The Solomon Islands.

SKILLS UNDERSUPPLIED	SKILLS OVERSUPPLIED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General shortage of skills in all trades noted. • Skills gaps notable in areas where standards are enforced: carpentry, plumbing, civil construction, among others. • Finishers. • Plumbers. • Welders. • Architects. • Lower level rural and community maintenance skills such as those required for footpaths and small bridges. • Environmental assessment, preparing specifications, and materials testing. • Geo-technical skills. • Quality assurance of construction works. • Technical skills for civil works. • Labour market study identifies the most needed skills over the next 5 years to include: skilled tradespersons including project managers, engineers, electricians, builders, mechanics, and plumbers. (Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development 2019 annual report). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carpenters • Too many trainees seen by stakeholders, however, this may be the result of a lack of connection between supply and demand. • Too many graduates, particularly electrical, with insufficient skills. • Engineers struggle to find work, however, this may be due to lack of connection between supply and demand.

Barriers to the Successful Implementation of Industry Training Models in The Solomon Islands

Key barriers to the development of successful industry training in the Solomon Islands are the limited regulation and standards, quality assurance, coordination, and capacity.

“Good regulation, and better experience, would change the whole [construction] industry.”
- Solomon Islands Employer

Limited Regulation and Standards

Inconsistent standards through the skills development system will need to be addressed to establish a successful industry training system. Currently, stakeholders state that the building code in the Solomon Islands is ineffective and out of date. Participants also reported that builders know basic principles but do not understand the standards which apply to construction. This leads to an inconsistent quality of outcomes and a poor understanding of the competences required to participate in the industry. Beyond industry standards, providers of construction related education and training are also providing inconsistent training outcomes - participants described inconsistencies between providers, particularly RTCs with no standardised curriculum.

Without professional standards, the public esteem of the construction industry has been reduced, as are the quality of outcomes. New building regulations are being introduced to parliament, however, participants noted that this has been in the works for some time and the outcome of the submission is uncertain. A working group of the Solomon Islands Chamber of Commerce and Industries (SICCI) has been recently tasked with reviewing and standardising building codes.

Having construction standards is not enough however, they need to be effectively regulated and monitored. Current quality assurance in the construction industry and its training sector is seen as ineffective. Competence-based assessment capabilities need to be improved and practical training needs to be better monitored to ensure quality outcomes. Central to this issue are apprenticeships. The Labour department currently only has the capacity to provide assessments and check that providers of apprenticeships meet minimum standards. Workforce monitoring for practical learning is weak and ongoing monitoring of apprenticeship activities is missing. Participants noted challenges with monitoring the performance of unskilled workers in civil works companies. Because of these lower quality apprenticeships, resulting trade skills certificates are often seen as low value by stakeholders.

Coordination

SITESA was recently established and is finding its feet; however, the organisation is tasked with addressing many of the barriers mentioned above. Crucial to addressing these challenges will be establishing clear roles and responsibilities within the sector. Participants noted limited sector coordination and general confusion about roles and responsibilities. Notably, these included the blurred responsibilities between SITESA and the Labour department which will need to be addressed – particularly in the management of apprenticeships. An example of this comes from recent capability building projects carried by several RTCs. Standards were lifted and the providers achieved recognition from SITESA, however, this resulted in them no longer teaching to the NTTTC curriculum, and the Labour department could not assess and accredit their learners. These inconsistencies can be expected in a system in a state of change but need to be addressed. Overall, participants noted that the apprenticeship policy is out of date and the system is not meeting training needs.

It is unclear from the research whether the NTTTC curriculum meets industry needs. Participants stated that NTTTC graduates had a strong presence in the industry, but also that industry had designed their own informal apprenticeship schemes in place of MCILI apprenticeships. It is unclear whether NTTTC certification is sought as a capstone to these non-formal industry apprenticeships.

Additional coordination challenges stem from inconsistent donor activities. The training sector has strong donor support; however, it is often piecemeal and lacking in strategic vision. Moreover, there is a lack of project or programme evaluation focused on how to ensure the sustainability of programmes. Programmes are launched, standards are lifted, then once funding recedes, they disband. Taking a whole of sector approach to support strategies would be valuable and may increase retention of outcomes.

Coordination of representative stakeholder groups was also identified as a challenge. Participants stated that the government operated Industry Standards Advisory Group (ISAG), although having good participation from stakeholders, lacks policy guidance and is therefore not effective at producing outcomes. The group needs the capability to arrive at actionable consensus, and the capacity to implement these actions. Further, professional bodies, such as the Solomon Islands Built Environment Professional Association, are not contributing to workforce planning and development activities; while the construction regulatory body and SICCI need to develop their regulatory practice. Establishing quality criteria for membership and increasing the reach of memberships for these organisations was seen by stakeholders as a potential solution to a lack of trust in employer quality. These memberships would provide one means of professional standard setting.

The lack of standards and coordination in the construction sector create a situation where skilled workers are hard to identify and hire. Connecting skilled workers to work opportunities can be a challenge due to the limited learning pathways beyond the NTTTC. Smaller, residential construction opportunities are largely acquired by word-of-mouth due to a lack of visibility of the workforce. There is also a disconnect between informal workers and the formal economy which means the former are locked out of formal training and employment. Participants noted that creating a centralised database of the workforce and their accreditations would help link employers with potential employees, particularly in the informal or remote areas.

Limited Capacity

With SITESA being a new institution, it will take time for it to develop the capacity and capabilities it requires to effectively meet its mandate. Beyond SITESA, there is a lack of capacity within the sector. Currently, a limited number of industry placements are offered while some employers are unwilling to release employees for formal training due to opportunity and training costs. Finally, providers lack the resources and training facilities for practical off-job learning. Demand for places in RTCs is high and in some cases the ability to meet this demand is low. Central to establishing an industry training system would be the need to secure sustainable workplace learning opportunities.

Participants also noted a lack of community development and capability in remote areas due to urban drift. Skilled workers are moving toward urban centres or overseas where they are more likely to find paid employment opportunities.

Other challenges include the prohibitive cost of internet for online learning provision; low wages limiting participation and work ethic; and overseas workers are frequently being brought in to perform work in the Solomon Islands, taking opportunities away from the local workforce.

The Development Needs for Industry Training Models in The Solomon Islands

Based upon the availability of resources; the status and capacity of Industry Training; and the current approach to skills formation, The Solomon Islands was classified in the research as an 'Emerging Industry Training System'. These types of systems were found to have some aspects of integrated and effective industry training systems but were lacking the coordinated policy and regulation to allow them to thrive.

The Solomon Islands have had industry training models implemented for some time through their national apprenticeship scheme. With the Establishment of SITESA, the Solomon Islands WBL system now has unified funding and regulation functions, however there are still legacy regulation and monitoring functions being performed by MCILI. This has caused some overlap in responsibilities. The Solomon Islands has many system-level features that establish a foundation of quality industry training, though, these are not being coordinated or integrated as effectively as they could be.

The development priorities for these types of industry training systems are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Development Priorities for Emerging Industry Training Systems.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES FOR 'EMERGING INDUSTRY TRAINING SYSTEMS'
<p>Policy and Coordination</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Development of industry training policy built around dual training models. 2. Engagement with key stakeholders to agree policy and implementation priorities. 3. Clearer and better resourced governance arrangements.
<p>Regulation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Capability building for regulatory bodies around dual learning systems and concepts. 5. Implementation of effective monitoring and evaluation systems and capabilities. 6. Extension of regulatory support and oversight into informal learning systems.
<p>Workforce Development</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Support for industry training qualifications built around dual training concepts. 8. Effective skills monitoring systems. 9. Employer involvement in qualification design.
<p>Financing</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Extension of student loan schemes to industry training. 11. Investment planning for providers.
<p>Delivery</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Enabling of industry training systems – on-job learning and assessment.

The Solomon Islands industry training system is in a state of change. Recent policy reforms, notably the establishment of SITESA, have resulted in changes to the structure of regulation and coordination functions within the country. This has also generated some confusion in roles and

responsibilities between different agencies. For the emerging industry training system to thrive, clear roles and responsibilities will need to be established and understood through all stakeholder groups. SITESA may need support in various forms to do this as it is a newly formed agency. System coordinators (government in particular) need to develop and project a consistent vision for industry training and the capabilities required for implementation.

An important step in establishing this vision for national industry training will be to evaluate the current system. The NTTTC and apprenticeship system has been widely utilised in the Solomon Islands, however, with the system-level changes and some potentially underperforming elements, there is an opportunity to determine if aspects of this system could operate more effectively to meet stakeholder needs.

Stakeholders believe that industry needs greater input in the system; in the design of programmes, the delivery of outcomes based on-job learning, policy development, and workforce development functions. The informal workforce will need to be included particularly around the accreditation of prior learning and the development of qualification pathways out of the informal economy. Regional perspectives would also be a focus with the development of regional skills monitoring and workforce development planning tied into the national and regional labour markets.

The industry training system needs enhanced governance and regulation to ensure clarity of roles and consistent competency outcomes. With many different providers of work-based education and different standards to teach to, there is no consensus on the competency framework for construction workers. The sector needs to establish competency standards and competence based qualifications for construction workers linked to building codes and requirements; and communicate and regulate these effectively through the qualifications registration and educational performance monitoring systems.

Lastly, industry training integration with general education could be considered; the current industry training provision sits independent from general education modes. Increasing pathways between industry training and general education modes may improve the perception of vocational pathways and facilitate more effective transitions to learning and work.

References

Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development. (2019). *Annual Report 2019*. Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, Government of the Solomon Islands.

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