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# **SUBMISSION: INQUIRY INTO THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRENGTHENING AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE REPUBLIC OF FRANCE**

## **April 2020**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The University of Wollongong (UOW) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry by the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee regarding the opportunities for strengthening Australia's relations with the Republic of France.

More specifically, UOW's submission addresses point C within the Inquiry terms of reference, ie 'options for enhancing strategic cooperation, including in the Indo-Pacific region and through multilateral fora'.

### **BACKGROUND ON EXISTING PROGRAMS AND COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECTS**

Australian universities are increasingly encouraging students to participate in outbound student mobility programs through either semester long exchange or short course programs as part of their internationalisation objective.

A key strategic objective within *UOW's 2020-25 Strategic Plan* is to develop our students as global citizens through enhanced opportunities for international student mobility and digitally enabled cross-campus learning collaboration. We will mainstream global outlooks across our portfolio of courses and develop a framework for international work integrated learning.

UOW has met or exceeded its outbound student mobility KPIs as part of its internationalisation strategy by increasing the number of students undertaking an outbound student mobility program as a percentage of the total domestic enrolled cohort to now be 4.3% (approximately 750 students per annum). It is the aim of the University to further increase this percentage. By providing opportunities to UOW students, and with an emphasis on the Pacific region, we will be not only meeting our own KPIs as an institution but will also be aiding in delivering on the objective of the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan to increase the knowledge and partnerships with our neighbours in the Indo-Pacific region.

### **EXISTING EXCHANGE PROGRAMS**

To support internationalisation in the French Studies curriculum, the University of New Caledonia (UNC) was identified as a key international partner by Dr Anu Bissoonauth-Bedford, convenor of UOW's French Studies program. A Memorandum of Understanding was established by UOW and UNC to promote exchange and language learning in context.



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New Caledonia is a Pacific nation that is undergoing rapid change; a French territory planning to hold its second independence referendum in September 2020 and an important destination for Australian students to improve their French language skills.

On average, around 220 students are enrolled annually in French language subjects at UOW. In the last five years approximately 24 UOW students have participated in the 3 week summer program offered by UNC

The Federal Government's New Colombo Plan grant awarded to UOW in 2018 provides students undertaking French language and culture studies in Arts and Sciences a three week cross-disciplinary study program at the University of New Caledonia (UNC) combining language study with research or cultural placement for three consecutive years. Working in small cross-disciplinary groups of two or three, students from the Arts and Science faculties receive one week of intensive French language and cultural communication training; and then undertake cultural and scientific visits in science research centre specialising in regional priority areas (mining and environment; biodiversity; and cultural, societal and linguistic diversity).

In the last two years, 24 students benefitted from this program which is very much aligned to the Federal Government's mission to step up Australia's strategic influence in the Pacific region.

## **COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECTS**

Academic staff within the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts have undertaken research on multilingualism and language attitudes in New Caledonia that has led to several publications. In addition, academic staff from the Faculty of Social Sciences are engaged in two projects in the Pacific led by Professor Anthony Okely who is a world expert in physical activity and children.

Professor Okely's work in the Pacific Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO) project with local researchers addresses the issue of high levels of childhood obesity in the Pacific islands. The research will inform a social marketing campaign to promote physical activity in children across a minimum of six Pacific Islands countries. Three of these participating countries are French-speaking: Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia and New Caledonia. Preliminary results show that the French-speaking islands are highly supportive of this research, having pioneered this project in their countries. Formative data have been collected from stakeholders in each of countries and planning is underway for a meeting in the second half of 2020 to commence the formal planning of the campaign activities.

Another Indo Pacific research that Professor Okely's and his team are working on is the SUNRISE project. This project is an international surveillance study of 24-hour movement behaviours in the early years (called SUNRISE) which involves around 30 countries, two-thirds of which are either low- or middle-income according to the UN Human Development Index. Professor Okely is planning on extending this research to include the three French



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territories in the Pacific (New Caledonia, Wallis & Futuna & French Polynesia) in the near future.

Although academic operations are currently paused due to the global pandemic caused by COVID-19, the aim is to continue to expand student mobility and to collaborate on research projects in particular with l'Université de la Polynésie française (UPF) based in Tahiti with a view to strengthening strategic relationships between Australia and France in the Indo-Pacific region

Key academic members will include:

- Dr Anu Bissoonauth-Bedford, Senior Lecturer in French Studies, Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts. Her research interests include Language Contact in French multilingual creolophone societies and Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL). She is currently investigating patterns of language use in New Caledonia, where French comes in contact with indigenous Melanesian languages, Tayo, a French Creole, and English as the territory prepares for its second independence referendum to be held in September 2020.
- Professor Anthony (Tony) Okely, Senior Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Director of Research at Early Start at the University of Wollongong. His research area is movement behaviours (physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep) in children, with a particular interest in low- and middle-income countries. He is part of the Pacific Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO) Network, working with Pacific Islands and Nations on initiatives to promote physical activity. This initial work is to support countries to develop a physical activity campaign. To date, the three French-speaking countries has been the first to collect the formative data which will guide the development of specific campaign activities.

The Australian Government prioritises the development of linkages between individuals and institutions in Australia and the Pacific, and it is a strategic priority for UOW to increase engagement with universities in the Pacific region. UOW is currently in the process of signing a student exchange agreement with the University of South Pacific in Fiji to increase semester student flows to and from Fiji. The faculty of Social Sciences at UOW also has an upcoming New Colombo Plan short-term project with USP in the area of community development, set to take place in late 2020/early 2021.

### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

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