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### Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE): 2017 Report

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## Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE): 2017 Report

### Abstract

Celebrating its 5th year, the Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) initiative continues to implement new and innovative approaches to developing placement opportunities for social work students through Western Sydney University alongside its partnering institution, the University of the South Pacific. Since 2012, thirty-two undergraduate students have successfully completed their final fourth year placement in the Pacific, with the view to also support the development of teaching and learning practices on Pacific social work, and the desire to further enhance the evolving professional identity of social work across Oceania. In 2017, the initiative saw 12 undergraduate students sent (our biggest cohort to date) to 4 countries - Fiji (5 students), Samoa (2 students), Tonga (3 students) and for the first time Vanuatu (2 students). Four new services were brought on board via a WSU Agency Agreement, alongside the other five existing services already working across the PIFE initiative. Positively, the School of Social Sciences and Psychology has embedded the initiative as a core program, promoting this within its budget and structures to ensure long term sustainability and ongoing hope to further support the growth and development of social work education that is underpinned by a genuine approach to working with diverse communities across the region. We also continue to celebrate positive outcomes with University of the South Pacific, alongside burgeoning support from the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and other Universities across Oceania keen to support growing interest in Pacific social work. This includes a unique collaboration with Massey University, who are also pioneering the advancement of Pacific social work through a symposium held at USP (Fiji) in March 2017, alongside the official launch of a Regional Resource Centre (RRC) that will further assist the development of relevant social work education, practice, policy and research. Further to such successes are the two journal articles published on the PIFE program thus far (with additional outputs currently under peer review), and the commissioning of a new Pacific Social Work book under Routledge, being developed with 35 co-authors assisting the writing up of 20 chapters that explore key fields of practice alongside sections on Pacific policy and research. This collection, edited by myself, Tracie Mafale'o (Massey University) and Bruce Yeates (University of the South Pacific) is the first of its kind, and we are all looking forward to seeing the book published in the second half of 2018.

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# Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE)

2017 REPORT

**WESTERN SYDNEY**  
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Social Sciences  
and Psychology



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## PIFE PROJECT MANAGEMENT 2017: REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

<b>JIOJI RAVULO</b>	5
<b>TEAM FIJI</b>	
Brooklyn Matailevu	9
Torika Naqasima	13
Stacey Perkett	16
Karen Sullivan	18
Melaia Turagaiviu	20
<b>TEAM SAMOA</b>	
Megan Hilly	23
Fuapepe Seiuli	25
<b>TEAM TONGA</b>	
Annuncia Alamoti	29
Darlene Chuon	32
Bridgette Kizana	34
<b>TEAM VANUATU</b>	
Fatme El-Cheikh Issa	37
Jessica Lin	40

# PIFE PROJECT

# MANAGEMENT 2017: REFLECTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Jioji Ravulo

### OVERVIEW

Celebrating its 5th year, the Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) initiative continues to implement new and innovative approaches to developing placement opportunities for social work students through Western Sydney University alongside its partnering institution, the University of the South Pacific. Since 2012, thirty-two undergraduate students have successfully completed their final fourth year placement in the Pacific, with the view to also support the development of teaching and learning practices on Pacific social work, and the desire to further enhance the evolving professional identity of social work across Oceania.

In 2017, the initiative saw 12 undergraduate students sent (our biggest cohort to date) to 4 countries – Fiji (5 students), Samoa (2 students), Tonga (3 students) and for the first time Vanuatu (2 students). Four new services were brought on board via a WSU Agency Agreement, alongside the other five existing services already working across the PIFE initiative. Positively, the School of Social Sciences and Psychology has embedded the initiative as a core program, promoting this within its budget and structures to ensure long term sustainability and ongoing hope to further support the growth and development of social work education that is underpinned by a genuine approach to working with diverse communities across the region.

We also continue to celebrate positive outcomes with The University of the South Pacific, alongside burgeoning support from the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and other Universities across Oceania keen to support growing interest in Pacific social work. This includes a unique collaboration with Massey University, who are also pioneering the advancement of Pacific social work through a symposium held at USP (Fiji) in March 2017, alongside the official launch of a Regional Resource Centre (RRC) that will further assist the development of relevant social work education, practice, policy and research.

Further to such successes are the two journal articles published on the PIFE program thus far (with additional outputs currently under peer review), and the commissioning of a new Pacific Social Work book under Routledge, being developed with 35 co-authors assisting the writing up of 20 chapters that explore key fields of practice alongside sections on Pacific policy and research. This collection, edited by myself, Tracie Mafile'o (Massey University) and Bruce Yeates (The University of the South Pacific) is the first of its kind, and we are all looking forward to seeing the book published in the second half of 2018.

### REFLECTIONS

As part of their final 50 hours of placement, students participating in the PIFE program are asked to complete a reflection report. Their contribution is based on six questions, which are evident across the 12 reports within this publication. Key themes have emerged from across participants and provide deeper insights into the experience of completing a social work placement in the Pacific. Additional information, including a Facebook live recording of the students presenting on their experience on placement, can be found via our PIFE Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/PIFieldEducation](http://www.facebook.com/PIFieldEducation).

In Fiji, students experienced levels of personal and professional growth; better insights and understanding of the role of decolonising social work approaches to assist in meaningful engagement with clients and community, including stakeholders. They were able to connect to rural and regional communities, providing further insight into the needs to such communities, alongside various cultural protocols needing to be undertaken in connecting and working collaboratively with local community members. Some were able to operate more independently, both personally and professionally, and create a better insight and understanding of the role of indirect social work. Development of professional skills in being able to work effectively with involuntary client groups and overcoming possible hesitation in engaging with such groups was achieved. In addition, understanding cultural perspectives and

practices were seen as vitally important, promoting a grounded understanding of the way in which someone positions themselves in their own traditional ways on knowing, doing, being and becoming which can greatly assist.

Within Samoa, students saw their placement as an opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way to the agency through the development of policies and models of service provision. In turn this dramatically changed their own position on western culture vs the world, and the need to be more competent in working with cultural diversity and difference.

Across Tonga, the placement experience promoted social work as a profession, alongside the specific tasks, skills and approaches to assist clients. It developed a stronger sense of self, and a deeper connection to other similar collectivist cultures. An importance of person-centred approaches and the role of Pacific culture in everyday realities was also realised.

And in Vanuatu, the students experienced unique growth that occurred due to time spent with a very supportive host family, enabling both to become more accustomed to the pace of work life in the Pacific region, whilst still achieving effective outcomes.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following has also been sourced directly from the students and provide further insights on the way in which the program operates. More so, it assists the ongoing review, and finessing of how the PIFE program aims to create sustainable approaches to ensuring students are given a positive learning experience. The following twelve recommendations have been put forward, one listed from each student, and will be further profiled to form future outputs and outcomes in the implementation of the PIFE initiative:

- In country field educators to be co-located in same town or area, enabling a more consistent approach to accessing support and feedback on a scheduled and needed basis.
- Maintain communication lines between field educator, and field supervisors to ensure everyone is aware of placement expectations and needs. This could be through email, phone, or meeting face to face or virtually (e.g. Skype).
- Enhance opportunities to discuss placement options; with view to possibly select the agency based on specific interests
- Provide better options for homestay or individual accommodation, with view to have recommendations of suitable accommodation supplied ahead of time
- Embed a learning activity in the learning contact that enables students to have time to connect with local client groups; especially if they are in a non-direct social work role or placement
- Students to be reminded to adopt a flexible approach to undertaking an international placement; with view to manage expectations with a willingness to be open minded
- Opportunities for more than 2 people per country (where possible) to assist in harnessing learning experience alongside social interactions outside placement
- Ensure homestay arrangements are conducive to learning outcomes, including the need to source options beyond fellow staff working in the placement agency
- Consistent communication strategies between Field Supervisor and Field Educator
- First Aid kits and other medical supplies to be taken with each group of students to assist when and where needed
- Consistent contact to be promoted by Field Educator with placement agency, including other opportunities to connect with other stakeholders in and around community
- Pre-placement confirmation from agencies on the scope and range of activities students will undertake; including research and supervisory expectations

We truly look forward to seeing the Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) initiative continue into 2018 and are grateful for the ongoing support of Executive Staff in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University, and The University of the South Pacific in implementing the project across the region. Apart from seeing the individual change occurring through the student's experience, we are also now seeing a positive change in the way in which social work curriculum is being transformed to be more inclusive of Pacific epistemologies and ontologies, alongside the growing notion that Pacific social work, as a profession, is coming into its own sense of meaning, purpose and belonging.



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“ Students experienced levels of personal and professional growth promoting better insights and understandings of the role of decolonising social work approaches. ”

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# TEAM FIJI

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“ Fiji taught me the importance of being grounded, present and the importance of working with people directly. ”

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### **What are the KEY activities that were undertaken on placement?**

I completed my placement in Fiji at an organisation called Homes of Hope. Homes of Hope work with young women and girls whom are vulnerable and survivors of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. During my time at Homes of Hope some of the key activities undertaken included shadow case management – where I would sit in with case managers whilst they assessed their clients' needs and create goals, facilitating group programs with the residential girls and community girls, undertaking assessments for new clients, creating awareness within informal settlements and villages through facilitating programs and group work sessions, attending hospital and mental health clinics as a form of support for residential girls and aiding in the completion of the community tool kits with the Homes of Hope staff.

### **What did you learn from doing a social work placement in the Pacific?**

Completing my social work placement in the Pacific aided in my self-growth, as well as a deeper understanding of social work as a profession and how the way we perceive social work practice can differ to how the Fijian social workers practice social work. Only recently they have started to incorporate more formalised approaches within social work for example using case management modules.

During my time in the Fiji Islands, I learnt to recognise and identify the impact of social, economic and political forces and how they affected clients through assessing client's needs; I gained self-awareness which helped me reconsider personal views and values when working with Fijian people. I learnt how to communicate effectively within a group setting with the Fijian people. For example, when facilitating group programs in Australia the facilitator tends to stand in front of the group and may start with ice breakers whereas in Fiji, the facilitator sits in a circle within the groups and explains what village in Fiji they are from, and through this create connections within the group of people. When completing 'home visits' Fijians practiced this in a different way; we would buy 2 loaves of bread, some butter and milk and take this to the house or person we were visiting as a sign of respect as they welcomed us into their homes. Most of the time they would make tea and share among those who was in their house what we had bought. In Australia this would be deemed as unprofessional and unethical, whereas in Fiji this was a sign of respect.

What I learnt in Fiji was that one standard way of working isn't always right, and that sometimes we get caught up in the systematic type of working environment where we have lost human connections and are constantly emailing, texting calling or referring clients through database systems. Fiji taught me the importance of being grounded, present and the importance of working with people directly. I was able to critically think about my practice in Australia and Fiji, and develop an understanding when working with culturally diverse clients. I also understood the importance of decolonising social work and how that can impact on how we practice. There is not one standard way of working, and we can't subject different cultures and people and apply them to a theory or practice and expect it to be the right way. When comparing the Pacific Islanders in Australia to the indigenous youth, I can see how the loss of connection to their culture and people have aided in some of the destructive behaviours of our own people living in Australia.



### What professional challenges did you experience whilst away?

There were many professional challenges I experienced. These challenges were due to the different systems of work between Australia and Fiji. One of the major things was time management. A meeting that was meant to start at 9:30am wouldn't start until 10:30am or even 11am. Because I worked for a faith based organisation, spiritual and religious practices were embedded within their practices. Young women were expected to attend bible study classes and when talking about their journey's in life, God was used and perceived to solve all problems. This was a challenge for me as within the social work practice we encourage self-determination and empowerment and at times they would tell the girls to 'lend their problems to God and He will fix them' with no actual work or input. I did not interfere with this as although it was a challenge for me to understand their way of working, I had to respect that this was a way that they connected and reached out to the girls.



Another time 2 young girls had gotten into a fist fight during their lunch time, and two staff members split the two girls up. One of the girls began to have a panic attack as she was breathing heavily. The staff members tried to take the girl to the room, but I stepped in and asked them to stop moving her as she could not breathe. I began to do deep breathing with her and talked her through it. As she began to calm down I saw the two staff members put their hands over her and pray. The next day the two staff held a meeting with other staff members and declared that the young girl was going through a demonic possession and not a panic attack. This was a major shock for me and challenged my work ethics. Despite this particular case, I respected how the organisation worked but stayed true to my purpose and was glad I stepped in when I did.

A major challenge for me was identifying the difference between Australia standard of social work and Fiji standard of social work. Practices that were acceptable within Fiji would may be deemed unethical or unprofessional in Australia, for example, Fijians place a big importance on cultural values, whether this be sitting within a group setting and having a bowl of kava with the Chief or head of the village to gain his approval to enter his village, or sitting with a family during home visits and having a cup of tea and some biscuits. At first I felt that there were no appropriate boundaries placed between worker and clients, but then I realised that this was the most important part of developing rapport with the people, and how much respect they showed you in return.

### How did you personally grow?

Personal growth was around connecting back to my own Fijian culture, I was able to reconnect to my people and gain a deeper understanding of who I was. I was humbled by the experience in Fiji, seeing how the Fijian people were grateful for the little things in life encouraged me to be grateful for what I have. I have also become an active listener, I've learnt how to actively pay attention to people and not form a judgement. Body language also plays a big part when communicating within the Fijian communities, whether they raise their eye brows to say yes or squint their eyes to indicate they were confused - identifying these body languages was an important part of actively listening. I have become more resilient, Fiji taught me how to face problems confidently, whether it was through spiritual guidance or someone sharing their journey, Fijians just have a very resilient approach to life. Mindfulness is a personal growth I developed, I was able to reflect and acknowledge the abundance I have in my life, instead of looking at what I had lost or what I didn't have. Completing my placement in Fiji reminded me why I wanted to be a social worker. I was able to reignite my passion for social work and find inspiration through everyone I had met throughout my trip. When people asked me why I do social work it was always an automated response, when people ask why I do social work now, coming back from Fiji I am able to answer that question with much more enthusiasm, passion and with purpose.

### How will you utilise what you have learnt back home in Australia?

I will utilise what I have learnt in Fiji back home in Australia by effectively working with Indigenous Australians and Pacific Islanders through connecting with them through their culture, spirituality and customs. The importance of body language, and being able to identify cues when talking to people is something I will definitely use as this can help social workers effectively communicate with clients. Being present and grounded within my practice is a personal importance for me as a social worker as the benefits of this through my placement showed me how effectively our clients respond and work with us when we show that we are present. As a developing social worker at times it is hard for us to not have our own judgements about a particular situation before we understand it fully. Through what I have learnt in Fiji, I have definitely learned to not form bias judgement on particular situations before they have happened, and to actively listen without judgement. Because my placement in Fiji has reignited my passion for social work, I will utilise what I have learnt in terms of decolonising social work and hopefully in future aid in research. Also, I aim to develop ethical and practical ways of working with Pacific Islanders that do not dismiss their culture but instead acknowledge that this is an important part of who they are.

### What can be done differently in the implementation of the PIFE initiative?

A more engaging and present social work field educator could have been chosen for the role as I did not feel I was supported as much as I could have been. Other than that I had a fantastic time during my placement and would like to thank Jioji Ravulo for allowing me to gain this experience and for creating this initiative as it has aided in my personal and professional growth.




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“ I was able to reignite my passion for social work and find inspiration through everyone I had met throughout my trip. ”

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“ Arriving into any village or community required us to follow Fijian protocol; involving the giving of the Fijian traditional yaqona ... ”

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# Torika Naqasima

## MINISTRY OF WOMEN, CHILDREN AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

### What were the key activities undertaken on placement?

The main keys undertaken in my placement was collaborating with other

professionals and service providers in the interests of the clients, in maintaining their privacy, within the client's knowledge and consent whenever it's possible. Assessing the welfare of the iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) people mostly in rural areas where the locals find it hard to commute by transportation to the Welfare offices in local towns.

Also worked in local rural areas with means by transportation in government vehicles to villages by promoting services via a Roadshow format. Additionally, I worked with young people at the Fiji Juvenile Centre, providing assessments and home visitations to empower and assist in achieving personal goals.

### What did you learn from doing a Social work placement in the Pacific?

I found that there were some similarities and also differences in doing Social work in the Pacific. Culturally I learnt Fijian culture was still very much intact although there are a lot of political issues. Fiji has become a melting pot with different nationalities that has resided there due to business ventures.

In my first week, travelling to an outlier of the main island by boat that took us about forty minutes to reach was the highlight of my fieldwork. The name of the island is called Beqa, located ten kilometres, (6.2 miles) to the South of Suva and has nine villages which is divided into two districts. Travelling with fifteen other government workers including my colleague from Western Sydney University and our supervisor from the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation.

### A village in Beqa called Dakuni

Travelling by boat to these villages day and night was tiring, although it opened my eyes to see the work carried out by the welfare workers for the village communities.

Arriving into any village or community required us to follow Fijian protocol; involving the giving of the Fijian traditional yaqona (kava) that is prepared from a pulverized root (and has a tingly numbing effect on your tongue). This is to be presented to village head through a traditional ceremony called sevusevu (welcoming / offertory) which provides a formal means of respect as visitors coming to do work together. I had to finish at 9pm during our five days due to the amount of files that was to be assessed across all nine villages.

Watching the villagers coming back in the early hours of the morning from fishing and the plantations to provide us with breakfast, lunch and dinner encouraged me to work my best and I learnt to appreciate life. However, apart from the village struggles we were always greeted with smiles and entertainment such as drinking kava after work, and the cultural dancing when we are about to depart. This is the beauty of Fiji that after the stresses of work, socializing in the manner with colleagues and of sharing a bowl of Kava where everyone sits on the floor to talanoa (talk together).

Interpersonal communications with the clients was challenging as I got to learn more of the culture and even dress more appropriately according to the Fijian culture when visiting the local villages in the inlands for assessment. This also gave me confidence in sharing my perspectives and likewise listening to their perspectives too. Discussions with the communities of their rights and responsibilities in providing them with honest and accurate information that was available at the time regarding the nature of the welfare services being offered to them made me feel good about myself.

Communicating with village communities made me learn not to give them high hopes into promising them anything that will be provided according to their needs, for example: welfare assistance. I also learnt that nothing was confidential in both amongst the workers and the clients.

Taking the services in to the inland areas that were close by, travelling by the

government vehicles each day or when there is a provincial meeting with government workers to do promotions on welfare services helped develop my understanding of social work perspectives and practices.

Surprisingly, most of the iTaukei in the village communities were illiterate, which resulted in most of their wants or needs not being heard due to their illiteracy. In essence, welfare workers are there to voice their opinions for them. Interacting with different individuals in the communities was never a dull moment listening to their problems and needs. Teamwork with the staff was great that everyone helped each other through communications in learning that made me able to fit in their line of work and also feel comfortable in their work environment

Supervisors were willing to help when tasks were given and asking questions when I felt that I needed to know some of the things that is not clear to me.

### **Samabula (Juvenile Centre) Farming is one of their main programs**

My last 7 weeks for work experience was working with disadvantage young people (boys) from the ages of twelve to eighteen at the Fiji Juvenile Centre located in Samabula, located 10 minutes from the Suva city centre.

Dealing with these young people by interacting with them in trying to get them

back on track was very challenging. Farming is one of the main program that the young people do every day in order to help them disconnect from all sorts of troubles such as stealing, robbing people walking on the streets, rape and dealing with drugs.

Learning to sit and communicate with them on one to one basis by listening to

what they going through in their lives gave me the strength to help in empowering and encouraging them to finish their education or to try and find employment for the ones that are nearly reaching the age of eighteen.

Some of them are victims of divorced or single parents who are being neglected, physically abused from their families and relatives. Working with the vulnerable young people and the staff of the Juvenile Centre gave me the abilities in understanding them more and relating theory to work. However, that helped me to identify if they were high or low risks and also by communicating with their parents through assessments with their backgrounds expanded my knowledge.

Having the potential to take on further responsibilities by being willing to spend more time with the young people and see the differences of their behaviour excelled my passion to work with young people. Being a good role model in showing them respect and love was very important to me and likewise for these young people too.

### **What professional challenges did you experience whilst away?**

My professional challenges were having the patience to work after hours.

However, obviously in Fiji, Social work is still developing that I professionally had to have open communications and give my perspectives in order to work professionally with the staff and also clients. My biggest challenges were coming down to grass root levels and listen, with feelings of empathy by imagining to walk in their shoes and try to help in any ways I could. Maintaining the client's records by keeping the records confidential, also without labelling the young people but to empower them in order to achieve their goals. Learning to be non-judgmental is one of the professional challenges that I decided to go with at all times.

### **How did you personally grow?**

My personal growth was trying to adapt back into my own Fijian culture and appreciate my work placement by interacting with individuals in the villages and communities. My confidence has increased more to complete through sharing of their knowledge, skills, experience and time. These have made me become more open to accept challenges in different environments. I also have grown by being more committed to tasks that are given to complete. Working with young people at the Juvenile Centre has also helped my personal growth by observing their behaviour and listening to their stories.

Also my strength and abilities has increased through the staff's continual encouragement and opportunities to step out of my comfort zone and try new things.

### **How would you utilize what you've learnt back in Australia?**

Working for ethnic communities would be the best place to utilize what I have learnt from my previous work experience. However, every human individual are all different depending of what type of circumstances and lifestyles they live. Being patient and understanding their backgrounds will enable me to help them, for example, their cultural and religious backgrounds. Also to be non-judgmental and be empathetic has given me the courage to utilise what I have learnt in my last work placement in any work environment.

### **What could be done differently in implementation of the PIFE initiative?**

I can say that I appreciate the implementation of PIFE, though there are some structures to be facilitated in order for students to feel confident where they are going to be accommodated, especially when they are miles from home. Also the Agencies that the students are going to do their field placements are properly arranged through communication with the Directors or the Managers of the Agencies. Field educators will be good to have someone with experience as a local that will be trusted to help with the students' needs such as accommodation and placements.





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“ ...all walks of life are human beings, therefore, they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect just like everyone else. ”

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# Stacey Perkett

FEMLINKPACIFIC PACIFIC, FIJI



I conducted my final placement at femLINKpacific, a “women’s based media organisation that is committed to advocating for gender equality, women’s human rights and highlighting the important role that women’s voices play in peace and security” (Sheppard & Kingsberry n.d., pp. 9). As femLINKpacific is a Community Media Centre, their key form of communication and technology use is radio and broadcasting. While completing this placement, the key activities I performed were based around developing content for the Look At My Abilities (LAMA) radio program. I was required to research and produce a radio production focusing on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), as this Convention has only recently been ratified in Fiji. I was given the chance to work closely with the femLINKpacific LAMA broadcasters, and with their help we conducted multiple interviews with representatives from numerous Disabled Person’s Organisations (DPO). I also facilitated a focus group which comprised of 6 women from different communities with diverse disabilities, to give them a chance to share their stories and experiences about what it is like to be a woman living with a disability in Fiji and their views on the implementation of the UNCRPD in Fiji. Once this content had been gathered and interviews had been transcribed, I composed a script incorporating snippets from the interviews and other information about the UNCRPD to educate other women and girls in the community of the action that is already taking place. We also hoped that other government officials and people in positions of power would hear this production and consider some of the recommendations made by DPO representatives and women in the focus group to ensure that persons with disabilities are having their rights supported in Fiji.

Doing a social work placement in the Pacific reinforced the importance of human relationships in social work, specifically involving clients and community members in creating social change. FemLINKpacific incorporate this with their suitcase radio (portable transmitting and recording equipment) as a platform to allow women and girls from around Fiji to voice their opinions and recommendations for certain issues to raise awareness and create social change and social justice. During my placement, I also learnt the importance of consultation and collaboration when working with communities to ensure they are included in creating social change. When conducting interviews and facilitating the focus group, the statement “nothing about us, without us” was mentioned a few times, further emphasising that society will not change to cater for the rights of persons with disabilities unless they are involved in decision making processes. I believe this consultation and collaborative work can be implemented to multiple facets of social work practice as clients and community members should always be considered experts in their own lives. They should be given the chance to voice their concerns and opinions to ensure social change is appropriate to their needs.

Whilst conducting my placement in Fiji, I found my role as a ‘producer’ developing content to be quite challenging. This was because, at first, I struggled with identifying the placements relevance to my social work studies which made it difficult to enjoy the experience and stay focused. I had meetings with my supervisor and Field Educator, and discussed with friends and family still in Australia to clarify my purpose and my role in the organisation and PIFE 2017 program. These discussions helped me understand the relevance of my work and the positive outcomes I would gain from this experience.

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“ I also learnt the importance of consultation and collaboration when working with communities to ensure they are included in creating social change. ”

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I also found indirect social work to be quite professionally challenging. As my work at femLINKpacific was to develop content for the LAMA program, my only interaction with members of the community was during interviews and the focus group. I realised that I enjoyed this aspect of being out of the office, talking with people and supporting them directly and in-person, more so than researching and putting together the actual production. I found that I did not like the indirect aspects of my work as I was too easily distracted from my work because I was not motivated to stay on task. I enjoy the opportunity to develop human relationships by engaging with members from the community face-to-face to address their concerns. Although I found this type of work challenging, I am grateful that I was able to experience it so that I now have a better understanding of what direction I would like to take my social work career.

In a personal capacity, this placement experience has increased my level of confidence as I am aware of the knowledge and information I obtain and I am more confident in voicing my opinions. I believe I can make more informed decisions with this knowledge and confidence. I believe this placement experience has also developed and improved my knowledge of self and understanding of my role as a social worker. I feel as though I now possess the knowledge, skills and abilities to be a competent social worker. I have been studying at university for a long time and I now believe that after this experience I am ready to become a qualified social worker and am confident to go out into the workforce.

I am also generally less stressed than before completing this placement. Working and living in Fiji for 3 months has shown me a slower paced, more relaxed way of working that encourages more self-care, avoiding burn out and over-stressing about work and life. This placement experience has made me humble and understanding of other people's individual issues, as I have learnt to be less selfish and to listen and interact with others more positively.

I have also become more independent living away from home for such a significant amount of time. I shared an apartment with another one of the PIFE student's and we were required to cook, clean and look after ourselves. I have come back to Australia with a new set of independent living skills and feel confident in myself. Since coming back to Australia, I have become more helpful around the house and have a new appreciation for my family.

There are so many things I learnt while in Fiji that I will utilise in Australia. Professionally, I believe I have learnt some new skills and abilities, such as conducting interviews, facilitating a focus group, transcribing, writing minutes and researching which I am sure I will continue to increase throughout my career. This placement experience has also given me insight to cross-cultural work and its importance in social work as I will continue working with people from different cultural backgrounds throughout my career. It gave me the ability to view social work from a different perspective, highlighting that our western view of social work practice is not necessarily the only effective way to work with certain individuals, especially indigenous peoples who have such a strong cultural identity.

My confidence in myself and in the knowledge I possess will be utilised through job interviews as I look for employment to commence my social work career. I also hope to incorporate a less stressful outlook on life, both in my career and personal life, and take each day as it comes. I hope to utilise my independent living skills when trying to move out of my family home within the next year as I have faith that I will be able to make this a successful and positive experience once again.

I think one thing that could be done differently in the implementation of the PIFE initiative would be to give students the ability to further discuss and possibly be given the chance to provide a preference for placement organisations. I personally would have liked to have some more information on the different organisations that were available and possibly some more input into the final decision made. This may have resulted in me conducting my final placement in an organisation that I had more interest in which could have made the whole experience even more enjoyable.

I would also recommend to somehow increase support from placement supervisors and field educators. Giving them a more detailed outline of their role and commitment to us as international university students may have been helpful. This could have avoided confusion between supervisors and students and given us more opportunities to engage with them and receive an efficient amount of support.



*Reference:*

Sheppard, N & Kingsberry, L n.d., *A Young Women's Guide to Community Radio: Women speaking to Women for Peace, femLINKpacific: Media Initiatives for Women, Suva, Fiji.*

# Karen Sullivan

## OPERATION FOUNDATION

“ The good you do today may be forgotten; do good anyway. Give the world your best and it may never be enough; give your best anyway ”



### What were the key activities undertaken on placement?

On Monday, I would attend Suva Women's prison with Jill (the wife of my Field Supervisor, Peter) and my colleague, Josephine. Jill and Josephine would facilitate a bible studies class over the course of 1 – 2 hours with a group of 12 women serving life sentences. This was followed by colouring-in, Sudoku or find-a-word for a further hour. During this time, Jill, Josephine and I would join the women in these activities. The women would sit quietly focused on the task at hand whilst others would chat to fellow inmates or Jill, Josephine or I.

On Wednesday, I would attend Suva Women's prison with Jill and my colleague, Katie. Katie would facilitate a craft class over the course of 2 hours with a group of 16 women, due to be released in 12 – 18 months. During the lesson, I would assist as needed and join the women in the activity. Again, the women would sit quietly focused on the task at hand. Others would chat to fellow inmates or to Katie or I.

Prior to the introduction of craft, Jill, Josephine and I would meet with the women on a one-to-one basis to provide counselling. Following a conversation with a female inmate, I began typing and delivering letters on behalf of incarcerated women to the High Court, the Attorney General and the Office of the Prime Minister of Fiji.

I also met with inmates at Tagimoucia Art Gallery. I provided some resources and offered encouragement and support. As a result of the relationships formed in prison, I would meet with ex-inmates for lunch to provide encouragement and support.

On one occasion, Peter and I met with a family in Sigatoka (approximately 1½ hours from Suva) to assess their needs with the goal of building the family a home.

### What did you learn from doing a social work placement in the Pacific?

Social Work in the Pacific is based on building and maintaining relationships.

### What professional challenges did you experience whilst away?

Prior to beginning placement in Fiji, I was anxious about my ability to build relationships with incarcerated women and men. I was disappointed with the lack of professional field education supervision whilst in country. I was saddened by many of the stories that the incarcerated women and men shared with me.

After reading many prisoner case files, I initially found it difficult not to judge. After reading one particular inmate's case file, I struggled with my feelings around working with her. I felt that if I opted not to work with her, I was mentally weak and; if I opted to, she may sense my judgement of her.

I found it difficult to know whether the prison guards were working to rehabilitate, encourage and support the women or whether the opposite was true.

When I visited the men's prison, I experienced the feeling of not knowing my place with the inmates or my male colleagues.

### How did you personally grow?

Completing Field Education 2 in Fiji was a life-changing experience. I learnt the power of presence. Operation Foundation (OF) is engaged in rehabilitation efforts with inmates and ex-inmates in Fiji. The core values of OF are relationships, humility, love, service, integrity and consistency. OF team members have the privilege of working with inmates and ex-inmates in Fiji due to their efforts in building and maintaining relationships.

I felt I was a valued community member as everyone I came into contact with would make eye contact, acknowledge my presence and say, 'Bula'. I learnt that incarcerated people often have traumatic backgrounds that led to their being incarcerated. The women serving life in prison found hope and joy in every day. The women were and continue to be an inspiration to me.

Overall, the students that travelled to Fiji to complete Field Education 2, Brooklyn, Stacey, Torika, Mela and I, were a source of support for one another.



### How will you use what you've learnt (back home) in Australia?

I have recently applied for a volunteer role working with SHINE for Kids facilitating contact between children and incarcerated parents. I regularly speak about my experience in Fiji (in Sydney) with a view to overcoming stigma and educating the general public about incarcerated persons.

### What could be done differently in the implementation of the PIFE initiative?

I think the Field Supervisor needs to provide adequate, meaningful and regular supervision.

Students should expect to stay in suitable accommodation. I had requested a homestay arrangement however the accommodation found for me was a 3-bedroom house with no housemates. The cooking facilities did not work and the bathroom was in a state of disrepair.

I was quite unhappy living there but felt that putting up with it was easier than finding new accommodation. I only moved out when, the night before, I was broken into (week 4 of 12). I moved in with a woman I had met climbing a mountain a couple of weeks prior. I let my Field Educator know what had happened and asked for some emotional support. I don't recall seeing my Field Educator at that time or for the remainder of my placement (week 5 – 12).

I believe students should be financially supported / receive a financial subsidy to complete Field Education 2 in the Pacific. Students completing rural FACS Field Education placements receive a grant towards their set up costs as do students who opt to Study Abroad.

Overall, I had an amazing experience. When I graduate, I intend to put forward a proposal to Australian Aid in the hope that they will support me to work with Operation Foundation in the future. I made some lifelong friends through The Rucksack Club (a hiking club that I joined whilst living in Fiji) and stay in touch with inmates, ex-inmates and my work colleagues. Fiji will forever hold a special place in my heart.




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“ I began typing and delivering letters on behalf of incarcerated women to the High Court, the Attorney General and the Office of the Prime Minister of Fiji. ”

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# Melaia Turagaiviu

## MINISTRY OF WOMEN, CHILDREN AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

### What were the key activities undertaken on placement?

I completed my field placement with the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation (MWCPA) in Fiji. MWCPA are a government agency that aims to address issues such as women's empowerment, child welfare, poverty, juvenile rehabilitation and aged care.

In the first few weeks of my placement, I was based at one of their district offices in a rural area and there, I interviewed and assessed clients applying for income support. I also participated in a few community awareness projects, where we travelled out to remote communities and informed them of our services. Most notably, we travelled by boat to a small island called Beqa and spent five days there visiting each village and engaging with locals.

Following that experience, I joined the Fiji Juvenile Rehabilitation and Detention Centre for boys between 12 and 18 years old. It is an organisation that comes under the MWCPA. My main task there involved developing a manual that would act as a resource tool to educate young alleged offenders on remand at the centre. The juvenile centre manager wanted Torika (fellow student) and I to develop a manual that would contain information and activities about issues affecting young people today. We completed a draft of the manual and they have promised to keep us updated on its progress.

### What did you learn from doing a social work placement in the Pacific?

I learnt many things during my placement. For one, I learnt to be more people/relationship orientated in the way that I work and open minded to other perspectives. I found the Fijians I met, both professionally and personally, very relationship focused. They especially appreciate it when outsiders join in and make the effort to not act like a stranger or a vulagi around their community. Many Fijians get a kick out of seeing non-Fijians speaking the language, trying local food or joining in on a kava session. On our trip to Beqa Island, we did not separate ourselves

from the village. Instead, we lived amongst the villagers in their homes. After we did our community awareness work and interviewed clients, we would even join them for lunch or a kava session. Obviously, this meant that sometimes boundaries were blurred but rules around professional boundaries in Australia do not apply as neatly in the Pacific. Fiji, particularly rural villages in Fiji, have a more communal culture so I needed to rethink my understanding of the worker/client relationship in that environment.

I also had to learn to respect cultural protocols and traditions whenever we travelled out to work in a different area. For instance, before beginning our work in a village, we had to consider the authority structure within it. First, we would ask permission from the Turaga ni koro (village head) and then go through a sevuvu (welcoming ceremony) and once we finished our work, we would have a farewell ceremony. And skipping any of these ceremonies was never an option. It did not matter if we were running late to see clients in the next village or just exhausted, we still had to attend these gatherings.

Another major challenge for me was learning to confront my own privilege, as a student from a western country. I became very self-aware in every interaction I had with colleagues or clients because I did not want to offend or come across as if my perspective was better than theirs. I found myself refraining a lot more and spent more time listening.

That said, I did also learn to see the value in my own perspective as a Fijian Australian. As someone who has a foot in Australia and Fiji, I could draw knowledge from my experiences in both cultures. My supervisor at the Juvenile centre was quite good at giving Torika and I the space to provide feedback about the organisation and social work in Fiji. This gave me the opportunity to reflect and share with them my own observations about the differences and similarities between both countries.

### What professional challenges did you experience whilst away?

While I eventually adapted to the work environment in Fiji, I did struggle for the first few weeks because I was just not used to the relaxed and relational nature of the placement. I was finding it frustrating because I interpreted their laidback approach as them lacking a sense of urgency to help clients. However, once I learnt to be more open minded and got to know the workers a bit better, the situation improved. The social/community workers I met, also had diverse views about social work practice. As a result, it was challenging trying to navigate around all the conflicting perspectives amongst the workers.

### How did you personally grow?

I am originally from Fiji but have lived in Australia for so long that I had forgotten a lot about my roots and culture. It was an amazing experience, relearning aspects of my country and reconnecting with family I had not seen in years. As a result, I feel I came back more confident and with a stronger sense of who I am.

Being around other Fijians also taught me to be humble and not just because I was in an environment where I was forced to confront my own privilege but also because humility itself is a quality that many Fijians value. Fijians are brought up to not take themselves too seriously and you will notice that especially through their humour. They tend to make fun of each other and sometimes the jokes can be brutally honest. I had to learn to laugh at myself and have a bit of tease tolerance while I was there. Fijians are also brought up to respect elders and value the needs of their family, extended family and community. It was refreshing to leave Australia, where I had more of an individualistic outlook on life, and go to Fiji, where I suddenly had to see myself as part of a larger community and accept responsibilities to that community even if it conflicted with my own needs.




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“...workers really immersed themselves in the communities they were working with and took the time to really get to know people in that community”

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#### **How will you use what you've learnt (back home) in Australia?**

My own experience of going back to Fiji, my country of origin, has made me realise the value of knowing where you are from and being connected to your culture. I gained so much confidence from that reconnection and it is a theme I would like to explore when working with clients struggling with similar identity issues in Australia. I could facilitate workshops around identity and culture with different community groups or explore those themes in a one on one session with a client.

There are also communities in Australia that share similar collectivist values to Fijian culture and when working with those communities, I plan on being a bit more flexible in terms of boundaries. One thing I really appreciated about social work in Fiji was how workers really immersed themselves in the communities they were working with and took the time to really get to know people in that community. On Beqa Island, the relationship between worker and client felt a bit more equal and reciprocal because the worker was willing to share a bit about themselves. Obviously, there are always risks to self-disclosure but the workers I saw were able to strike a good balance between the personal and professional space. I do

not know what that would look like in an Australian context, but it is an attitude I plan on incorporating in my work with communities here. However, it would ultimately depend on the rules of the organisation I am with.

Along with that, I was really struck by how much emphasis they placed on respecting cultural protocols. It is something that I already try to do in Sydney, but it was good to be reminded of its importance. I was especially impressed with the way various beliefs, cultures and traditions were celebrated in the organisation. They would not only observe Fijian iTaukei cultural traditions but Christian and Hindu traditions as well. None of these traditions were met with any resistance, nor did it cause any division amongst the workers. While racial tensions do exist in Fiji, within the organisation itself there was a lot of intercultural tolerance and understanding. Again, this is an approach I would like to utilise in Australia. If I ever get a job in a community development setting, I would like to create more spaces for that kind of intercultural dialogue.

#### **What could be done differently in the implementation of the PIFE initiative?**

There is not much I would change however I do think all students on PIFE should experience direct client/community work in the Pacific. Most students, I suspect, sign up for PIFE to develop their cross-cultural awareness skills and I found that I learnt more about that when I was interacting directly with clients and the community. That is not to say that you cannot develop those skills working in an office doing policy and research, but the cross-cultural learning is limited in an office setting. I was fortunate to experience both settings and while I got a lot out of both environments, I would still make sure all students spend at least a month of their placement doing some form of direct social work in the Pacific.

# TEAM SAMOA



# Megan Hilly

## SAMOA PRISONS AND CORRECTION SERVICES

“...has been vital to the developing of my understanding and respecting the personhood and dignity of those who are different to myself...”



### What were the key activities undertaken on placement?

The opportunities for avenues of tasks to be undertaken throughout my placement experience with Samoa Prisons and Corrections services was bountiful. Some of these opportunities for students were to co-facilitate a selection of rehabilitative programs (such as Anger Management programs, Sex Offender Relapse Prevention programs and mental health programs), curation of new recreational programs, and the opportunity to write policy for the very first Case Management System for Samoa Prisons and Corrections Services. It quickly became evident after discussions with my direct supervisor within Samoa Prisons and Corrections Services that the Case Management System was at the forefront of necessity and had quite a pressing need within the agency's operations. There was no pre-existing method of maintaining effective case work methods and the keeping of other affiliated paper-trails, goals of the inmates and their movements within the Samoa Prisons and Corrections Services. Once the aforementioned factors were established, it was very quickly determined my placement experience would be spent in this particular area.

### What did you learn from doing a social work placement in the Pacific?

Undertaking a Social Work placement in the Pacific has widened my perspective on effective practice and how to maintain an open-mindedness within a cross-cultural setting. This meant being able to adjust quickly to particular Samoan customs and traditions, and being able to maintain a focus on the goals and objectives of the Samoan Prisons and Corrections services as an agency. The experience has broadened my thinking on how I will be able to further harness an understanding of and advocate for those individuals, cultural groups and families I may work with in future. It has been the most valuable learning experience I have had and has been vital to the developing of my understanding and respecting the personhood and dignity of those who are different to myself who may be facing a kind of adversity in their lives and are in need of support.

### What professional challenges did you experience whilst away?

Working in the corrections context within Samoa Prisons and Corrections Services, there were many cross-cultural challenges that presented themselves when engaging with both colleagues within the office space and with inmates. These challenges surrounding the writing of policy for the agency surfaced as the formulating of the Case Management System progressed. It became evident that some factors surrounding case work in a Western context, may not have necessarily been successful when applying particular methods of practice within the Pacific context. This was a constant learning hurdle when undergoing the writing of the Case Management System.

It was a constant collaborative effort with Samoa Prisons and Corrections staff and personnel which was not always smooth sailing. However, it was a necessity to ensure that the system and handbook would be easily implemented and understood by all Samoa Prisons and Corrections staff members.

Once the Case Management System and Handbook was completed, the next phase of the practicum as mentioned, was the co-facilitation of rehabilitative programs. These programs included the Anger Management program, Sex Offenders Relapse Prevention and mental health orientated programs). Given the nature of deeply the entrenched attitudes and views surrounding mental health issues in Samoa being essentially non-existent and very much over-looked, it was tremendously difficult to engage in a dialogue with the inmates on issues of depression, anxiety and other mental health issues and disorders.

This surfaced as a challenge during the running of programs weekly and certain adjustments were to be made to the structure to ensure the weekly messages were being delivered in a way that participants could understand. Close deliberations and discussions during supervisions with my field educator, Luagalau, was monumental to the program's progress. Her guidance and knowledge was key to my learning experience and professional development on the whole.

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“ The opportunity for personal growth within this particular learning experience coincided with my own personal growth in quite a monumental way ”

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**How did you personally grow (provide feedback where appropriate)?**

The opportunity for personal growth within this particular learning experience coincided with my own personal growth in quite a monumental way. I feel this was solely because of the professionals and the families I was surrounded by who allowed me into their lives with open hearts and the kind of welcoming, generous spirit that I would never have imagined to be met with entering into the Pacific Island Field Education program. This support given to me by the aforementioned people were the driving force behind my successful completion of the practicum in offering not only their own knowledges and discussions around cultural perspectives, but also their past experiences within the Social Work sector in the Pacific Islands. I have no doubt that I will carry this experience with me as I move forward in my career as a Social Worker and will continue to uphold them both in practice and in my every day life.

**How will you utilise what you've learnt back home in Australia?**

Ways I will utilise my experiences and what I have learned from my field placement affiliated with Samoa Prisons and Corrections Services will be maintaining a continual investment in respect for Indigenous communities with both Pacific and non-Pacific in whatever context or setting and working collaboratively with these families, groups and individuals in a non-punitive way.

This kind of cross-cultural social work practice carries a very unique essence that can be easily translatable and transferable into many different facets and areas within the Social Work profession. I feel very fortunate to have learned a new skill set that has set me up confidently work with the aforementioned Pacific and non-Pacific community groups as a result of my placement experience in the Pacific Islands.

**What could be done differently in the implementation of the PIFE initiative?**

I found the process quite adequate in the preparation before the placement took place. The cultural workshops in the various fortnightly meetings and logistical preparations were beyond helpful for the homestay accommodation factors and also, for the actual agency itself; were both informative and offered enough information for students so as to not impact the students experiences going in. In relation to these experiences, a positive attitude towards the unknown and allowance for flexibilities in plans is crucial. Students should be encouraged to enter the experience with a solid work ethic, positive attitude and an open heart for the best experience possible.

It's all about what the students make their experiences to be.

# Fuapepe Seiuli

## SAMOA PRISONS AND CORRECTION SERVICES

“ I came to realise that respecting cultural differences can greatly improve relationships between people from culturally diverse backgrounds. ”

### What were the key activities undertaken on placement?

The Samoa Prisons and Correction Services core functions are:

- To perform duties and functions and exercise powers in accordance with the Prisons and Corrections Act and other Acts.
- To manage prisons.
- To provide for the management, custody, care and rehabilitation of prisoners lawfully held in custody.
- To perform any other functions given to it under this Act or any other Act.

During my placement I was heavily involved in intervention programs for the offenders, therefore, working under the Department service unit, one of the biggest goals was to help offenders gain the skills they need to live a law-abiding lifestyle once their sentence was complete. One way this may be achieved is through a range of programs and interventions which target offending behaviour such as anger and domestic violence. Our Department aims to help offenders get their lives back on track by better understanding their offending behaviour and learning new ways to avoid reoffending. Our Department offers programs that address addiction, violent offending, general offending, sex offending and work to improve a prisoner's cognitive skills.

When the individual first arrives at the prisons they are assessed by our team and then have the option of undergoing a range of treatment programs to help them identify their problem areas. Once their assessment or profiling is completed by a case worker, they are then allocated to either sex offending, violent offending and general offending programs. I personally planned and prepared three programs which were Anger Management, Healthy Minds, and Healthy Relationships program. I was also given the opportunity to co-facilitate Sexual Relapse and Domestic Violence programs. The Anger Management and Domestic Violence program looks at the causes of anger and violent offending, and helps prisoners develop positive behaviour and attitudes, by focusing on accepting responsibility for their actions. The Sexual Relapse program covers a range of issues including victim empathy, social perspective taking and critical reasoning. The aim is to give participants the skills and insight they need to accept responsibility for their offending behaviour. Lastly, Healthy Minds and Healthy Relationships programs were intertwined with the other programs and these works to improve a prisoner's problem solving, and social interaction skills and to help them understand their personal beliefs and values.



“...learning a lot about the culture was vital for me to understand who I am and where I am from.”



#### **What did you learn from doing a social work placement in the Pacific?**

Building relationships based on cultural diversity requires understanding and respect for cultural differences at an individual and organizational level. Cultural bias is often learnt through socialization, and being unaware of personal biases. This may lead to discrimination, misunderstandings and conflicts that will affect work relationships and service delivery. When I first started this placement, I went in with a mindset of being a super hero and changing the world. I had the idea that the western approach of doing things was the right way and that the Samoan people should take our methods into consideration to be successful in life.

The wonderful staff I worked with at Tafai'gata prison, really helped to broaden my perspective on culture values and how it is implemented in the intervention and prevention strategies. For example; religion plays a major role in the Samoan culture. The people embrace their faith in God and it becomes their source of strength and if God is in their life that was what measured as a successful life. Their world revolved heavily around God and family. Sooner rather than later, I came to realise that respecting cultural differences can greatly improve relationships between people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Although, I am of Samoan decent, my whole life I have grown up in the western culture and have become use to the western way of living, therefore, going back to Samoa was a major culture shock for me. In my understanding, the social work profession is built upon culturally sensitive practices that advocate for social and economic justice for those who are disadvantaged, oppressed, and/or discriminated against.

It is important to identify standards that make up culturally competent practices, including self-awareness, cross-cultural knowledge, skills, and leadership. In addition, over the past 2 years, the Department Service Unit has made considerable progress in the number and quality of programs and interventions on offer. As a result, the participation numbers of offenders in programs has jumped significantly, which indicates that the offenders are willing and ready for change.

#### **What professional challenges did you experience whilst away?**

My first challenge was the communication barrier when it came to facilitating programs for the offenders and conversing with clients and staff members. I was able to clearly understand the Samoan language, but I could not speak it fluently. Therefore, it had limited by ability to be effective in the agency as I believe effective communication provides effective results. During my program planning on how to tackle this issue I had to prepare my clients for the sessions beforehand. Making sure they know what is going to be discussed and prepare them for the next sessions. I asked for an interpreter to be present and all written material to be available in Samoan. During the sessions, I would make sure they asked questions on things that seem unclear.

Although I was allocated an interpreter during the facilitation of all the programs there were times when the facilitator was not present, and the offenders had questions or needed vital advice on an issue that occurred. During these absences it was difficult sometimes for me to respond.

Secondly, facilitating the programs for the male offenders was quite challenging in a few of the programs because of the gender inequality. Samoa is a male-oriented culture and women still hold a subservient place in Samoan society. In short, as children are in some cultures, so are women in the Samoan culture- they are to be seen and not heard. Over the years there has been a great devaluation of women occurring and a long tradition of not regarding women's voices as authoritative. The male offenders found it difficult to listen or take advice from a women facilitator on their issues.

As a result, at times, it was quite uncomfortable for both facilitator and client. As an agency of change we understand how the world is constantly changing and evolving into new things and that is the same with Samoa. I believe the clients do not completely understand the concept that times have changed. Given the nature of this problem, an obvious solution is education.

#### **How did you personally grow?**

I have been truly honored to work with a passionate, dedicated and undeniably talented group of people. In such a short time I have learnt so much, and have been astounded at the opportunities I've been given. I found a connection with the culture and felt a sense of 'belonging'. I have always been aware of the Fa'a Samoa which basically is a set of guidelines that dictate how Samoans should conduct their lives. Therefore, whilst observing the people and their culture, one interesting aspect was that this was a concept linked closely with the ideals of culture and identity. The fa'aSāmoa is known as a 'socio-economic and political framework' based on the social structure of the āiga (family), the nu'u (village/polity) under the authority of the matai (chief), pulenu'u (village leader) and fono ole nu'u (village council).

Therefore, learning a lot about the culture was vital for me to understand who I am and where I am from. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are changed by our experiences daily. Snippets of conversations, observations, and the way people treat us and the way we treat people, all change and challenge us constantly. It's just that most of the time we don't register or acknowledge the effect our experiences have on us. I believe effective practice stems from observation of people and their problems in their own setting. Without knowing or acknowledging it, our observations change our way of thinking and experience in life.

#### **How will you utilize what you've learnt back home in Australia?**

Australia is a vibrant, multicultural country. It is home to the world's oldest continuous cultures, as well as Australians who identify with more than 270 ancestries. As Australia is becoming more diverse, it's important to know and understand all the different types of cultures. My experience working in Samoa, has taught me to become more culturally competent; to purposefully obtain education, and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression. Cultural competence is about our will and actions to build understanding between people; to be respectful and open to different cultural perspectives, to strengthen cultural security and work towards equality in opportunity.

The lessons learnt from my placement will help me work more effectively with Pacific and Indigenous families and communities back in Australia. Many Indigenous families and communities in contemporary Australia face immense challenges. Their strength and resilience are compromised by multiple complex problems, including historical and ongoing dispossession, marginalization, and racism. They also have to live with the legacy of past policies of forced removal and cultural

assimilation. These have all contributed to the high levels of poverty, unemployment, violence, and substance abuse seen in many Indigenous communities. The key factors I will utilize when working with diverse cultures in Australia is to work with (rather than working "on") Indigenous communities; ensuring service is culturally competent; and cultivating networks and relationships. I have found that relationship building is fundamental to cultural competence and is based on the foundations of understanding each other's expectations and attitudes, and subsequently building on the strength of each other's knowledge. Despite the many new changes put in place, Australia still has a long way to go; too many people in Australia continue to experience prejudice and unfair treatment.

#### **What could be done differently in the implementation of the PIFE initiative?**

Personally, I would have properly planned my trip beforehand, paying off my flights/ homestays earlier as well as saving up extra money for emergencies which could have saved me a lot of trouble that I encountered whilst on my trip.

Every team is made up of different personality types, we all have our ways of working and doing things differently. Although, I would suggest the PIFE initiative send more than two people to a Pacific Island. I found that a bigger group seemed to have a better experience and connection in their placement, for example, Tonga and Fiji experience seemed to be more productive socially and professionally than the Vanuatu and Samoa team.

In conclusion, despite all the unforeseen circumstances, I had the best experience in Samoa and would do it all over again in a heartbeat.

# TEAM TONGA

# Annuncia Alamoti

## VAIOLA HOSPITAL – MENTAL HEALTH UNIT

### What were the key activities undertaken on placement?

Key activities during placement at Vaiola Hospital Mental Health Unit were co-facilitating daily activities with the mental health clients. Also facilitating musical group therapy activities that were introduced in to the mental health unit. These activities and games conducted, were Prayer programs, Kava sessions, Aerobics, Arts & Craft, Singing, Table Tennis, Volleyball and Tapa printing. Different activities and games were completed on each day as a way of using clients time in the unit.

Other tasks I was involved with was data entry of questionnaires that had been conducted by the Clinical Psychologists and other administration tasks. This was completed weekly as there were mass amounts of data entry that had not been completed.

Informal counselling was another key activity that was conducted during placement. I found myself undertaking a lot of these informal sessions through conversations with clients, who would approach me needing someone to talk to. Weekly home visits to families and individuals in the community was also completed weekly, on Thursdays. The purpose of the home visits was to follow up on clients who had been discharged and how they were coping adjusting back into the community. This home visit would consist of the Clinical Psychologist, Police Officer and Community Worker.

### What did you learn from doing a social work placement in the Pacific?

In Vaiola Hospital Mental Health Unit I learnt that Social work is a profession that is still under recognized. I found myself constantly repeating and educating other staff members and individuals the role of a social worker and its role in the Mental Health unit. Also at times during placement I found that showing other workers and clients my contribution to the workplace gave them a little insight into what social workers can do in the Mental Health Unit.

Completing placement in the mental health unit, the Clinical psychologist was overwhelmed not only with work for a psychologist but also with work that is Occupational Therapist and Social Worker would complete. I learnt that there was a big need for a social work in the Mental Health unit and assisted in areas and tasks where I felt I was confident in as a social worker.

I learnt that all staff members in the Mental Health Unit work very hard towards not only improving the mental health of their patients but also educating their families and friends of the patients on the mental health of each individual. Educating families of clients is a task that is also a constant challenge for the Mental health team at Vaiola, the lack of knowledge about Mental Health means that there is a lot of stigma and discrimination that is faced.

### What professional challenges did you experience whilst away?

There were many professional challenges I experienced whilst working in the Pacific. One of the challenges I faced in the Mental Health Unit was Motivation and Productivity from other staff members. I found this very difficult as at times certain tasks from different fields were not being executed properly. I found this to be a very challenging because out of this challenge a patient in the ward died from a fight, which could have been prevented.

At times I found that keeping professional boundaries challenging with clients, because as a worker you spend and invest time into improving the clients wellbeing, and that can become difficult during the discharge process. I experienced this challenge, and I dealt with it with my supervisor by openly discussing the way I was feeling. She provided advice which reassured and refocused myself, that the work conducted is to help the client's mental health and bring them back in to the community.



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“ I found myself understanding, connecting and really appreciating my Tongan traditions a lot more. ”

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**How did you personally grow?**

This experience and being away from my familiar environment greatly impacted the way I work with clients. I found myself stepping back numerous times and really thinking about a situation before proceeding with action. It helped me step back, think outside the box and take a look at the bigger picture instead of what is right in front and being quick to act. I was able to see this personal growth during the home visits conducted through placement and how workers would approach clients. I would always think about the actions the professionals used and also remembered the cultural setting I was in.

I found myself understanding, connecting and really appreciating my Tongan traditions a lot more. Grasping onto a thorough understanding of certain cultural traditions such as dress attire. The ‘Tao’vala’ is a woven waist mat that is a traditional dress and is worn to work, church and events.

I was also able to really connect more in terms of the Tongan language as I was able to strengthen that part of communication with staff and clients and attain confidence when talking in the language not only with clients and staff but with other Tongans in the community and with family members.

The experience in the Pacific was also very humbling and really opened my eyes to appreciate and be grateful for what I already in Australia and embracing it more.





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“ I found that the clients in the mental health unit responded better when working in groups. ”

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**How will you utilise what you've learnt back home in Australia?**

Whilst completing placement in the Pacific Islands I observed and understood that they are communal in a number of things that they do. I found that the clients in the mental health unit responded better when working in groups. I observed that they were a lot more vocal being collective and conversations and discussions were a lot deeper, making it more efficient in terms of time getting into the issue faster than the 1:1 with the clients.

How I would utilize this in Australia would be working with different cultural groups. I would have to keep in mind a way an approach that would work effectively with different cultural groups. An example of this would be through working with Indigenous Australians would be taking the same approach that I have learnt in the Pacific Islands. As I am aware that Indigenous Australians are also very communal, therefore keeping in mind the different ways in which to approach cultural groups.

**What could be done differently in the implementation of the PIFE initiative?**

For future students, I think that homestay with someone from their workplace would not be ideal for long term. The reason for this is that the professional boundaries between workers become blurred and therefore changes the way in which workers approach and work with the students on placement. Also if homestays were to be organized by the external social work supervisor in the Pacific, then for background checks on the homestays families too, this is to ensure the safety of future students on placement.



# Darlene Chuon

## TONGA FAMILY HEALTH ASSOCIATION (TFHA)

“My memories and experiences in Tonga were unique and has complete changed my outlook in life from a different perspective.”



### What were the key activities undertaken on placement?

The key activities undertaken on placement were to outreach into communities and deliver educational workshops on family planning, education on sexual reproductive rights, maternal and child health, and counselling assistance. I had the opportunity to observe and learn from the organisation's registered nurse in promoting sexual health issues to the community. The organisation and I worked in delivering health promotion education about STI's, HIV, and safe sex to young people, people at risk and the LGBT communities in communities and outer villages and also to students at the University of the South Pacific. I also assisted in condom distribution and writing up reports for the World Health Organisation.

### What did you learn from doing a social work placement in the Pacific?

Coming from a Western society, it is understandably appropriate to be so involved in learning from written literature where they are informed by a preponderance of human learning patterns through the tradition of the printed words. This means that we link written evidence based and theoretical practices within our work scope to understand human behaviour and how to assist individuals with a crisis. Although this is highly relevant and can almost be applied universally – I was able to experience and learn through another method of understanding and adaptation in the new learning skills. Unlike learning through the Western context, I was able to immerse myself in a non-western indigenous culture in Tonga, by enabling me to step in to a non-literate learning pattern that is filtered by spoken traditions that rely heavily on culture, values, ethics, morals and community practice.

I did learn that some theoretical practices cannot be applied to solely on individuals only, as the culture reflects not only the individuals, but immediate and extended families to communities also.

### What professional challenges did you experience whilst away?

Working as a Youth Caseworker back in Australia, I am used to policies, procedures, work standards and professional boundaries. In Tonga, from a Western view, the professional boundaries are limitless and there appears to be no lines that are drawn in which circumstances that can be seen as unprofessional in the western world, is completely normal and natural. For example, teachers will allow children to come to their house to submit papers by a certain time, and one time where I was practicing with the organisation's Drama group – we could not practice on the Sunday (the day before the performance), due to that it was a church day, and rather that we would practice the midnight after the Sunday had passed. It shocked me in ways where this would not happen back in Australia, however, is completely in the norms of their tradition that individuals use the Sunday day for family time, and church time – where no music (other than church music) or performances are not allowed to happen on a Sunday.

Another professional challenge was the cultural context of how the organisation was eager to know about my social life, where I had been, what I was doing and where I was going outside of work hours. I struggled quite a bit with this as this was my personal life, and was not used to have my employer following up, or intervening my social and work life balance. Although, I could understand the necessary precautions they were trying to make as I was a foreigner in their eyes and only wanted me to be safe. I can also understand that it is a cultural responsibility that they felt they had while I was working in the organisation.

### How did you personally grow?

Travelling to Tonga tested my limits in ways I had never thought it could. I went through some experiences that have taught me to be patient, aware and culturally respectful. My memories and experiences in Tonga were unique and has complete changed my outlook in life from a different perspective. I would say my 'people skills' is one of the primary things that I continue to develop about myself. When I am out in a new country (and I have done quite some individual travelling around the world), I am usually forced to make decisions in meeting new people. The exposure to people with different backgrounds, stories, morals and values has often leads to interesting conversations that I will savour for the rest of my life.

This in all, has improved my communication skills and has help me build up my network in acquaintances - and within a few conversations, I was boarding from a house where I had to shower by boiling water in a kettle and mixing it with cold water from a bucket, to living with one of the wealthiest families in Tonga (with hot showers of course)!

Other aspects on my experience on personal growth was the immediate understanding and similarity of the Tongan culture with family and communities in comparison to my Khmer background. It felt quite similar with some intergenerational misunderstanding and conflicts in the workplace, and the familiarity back at home. The experience made me understand that this is the nature of the culture and tradition to uphold values, morals, and ethics and only to be passed down to generations to come. It made me appreciate my grandparents ways of teachings and where they are coming from and trying to understand from a millennial western viewpoint also.

### How will you utilise what you've learnt back home in Australia?

By developing an appreciation and deeper understanding of the Tongan culture and society, I will able to utilise my understanding, and work from a different cultural context with Pacific islanders in the community. I feel while working in the Australian Western system, I fall into the western practices of the lamenting system and to go along with it, which in turn, may not assist people with different cultural backgrounds and can further damage cultures and connection to their communities. I believe the learning process has made me become a better problem solver and independent thinker where I can find a creative way in becoming more retrospective with my work experience in Tonga.

### What could be done differently in the implementation of the PIFE initiative?

The implementation of the PIFE initiative is an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in a new environment with new learning opportunities and challenges.

- Things could be done differently;
- Housing inspections and checklists before students are placed in homes.
- Communication process and action processes are streamlined with student's requests by Field Educators.
- Change of work placement organisations on request.

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**“ I believe the learning process has made me become a better problem solver and independent thinker...”**

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# Bridgette Kizana

## WOMEN AND CHILDREN CRISIS CENTRE

“What is deemed as appropriate or efficient practice in Australian, did not necessarily work best in Tonga.”

### What were the key activities undertaken on placement?

At the Women and Children Crisis Centre (WCCC), I had the opportunity to participate in training around domestic violence and the mental health consequences of gender-based violence. I was able to liaise with staff to independently create and facilitate relevant workshops for the clients at the safe house (refuge) such as positive thinking and self-esteem for the women, health and nutrition for both the staff and clients and arts and craft for the children. I also co-facilitated parenting workshops for young mothers with staff members. Where available, I was involved with the counsellors and police work in advocating on behalf of clients which would involve professionally confronting their abusive partners to return their children or possessions including passports.

Every week the staff members would come together with 3 anonymous stories from women and children who may be experiencing domestic violence seeking advice. I was involved in conversations and debates around these stories on best practice, solutions and what WCCC can offer before they would broadcast it on the radio to raise awareness.

### What did you learn from doing a social work placement in the Pacific?

Within Tonga, the social work profession is not as common as in western countries and a social worker role is not clearly understood by a vast majority of the community. Due to this,

it meant that I had to reshape and redefine my role and expectations during my time there to effectively work within the Tongan community. At times, it was important for me to explain to workers and clients what exactly my role is and how I can successfully utilise my skills and abilities. What is deemed as appropriate or efficient practice in Australian, did not necessarily work best in Tonga. An example of this was the way in which sessions or workshops would be run. The Tongan community has a great deal of respect for elders or people in positions that appear to be of higher authority, which can be shown differently to western countries. This impacted the way I would conduct sessions or workshops, as often clients would not make eye contact, would agree with what was being said by default or wait until asked a question.

It was significant for me to make note of this practice to ensure that I take extra caution around my position and how I would approach discussions with them that allowed them to feel comfortable enough to share genuine thoughts.

In Australia, we have a range of different opportunities and services available in terms of welfare and other areas of our lives. There are laws and policies that serve to protect people and promote equality for all. Tonga are still developing specific laws that promote child protection and gender equality. An example of an existing unequal law is women are not allowed to own land. For women and children experiencing domestic violence, this creates situations where men are automatically given rights to their homes and women are forced to leave with no opportunity to purchase their own. However, as a result of the strong community support, often relatives or friends will allow them to live in their homes.

When I initially arrived in Tonga, the only difference I knew about professional attire was that they were able to wear flip-flops or sandals to work. My host family supported me in educating and providing me with other appropriate cultural clothing such as a tupenu (wrapped garment) and a kiekie (ornamental girdle worn around waist on top of clothing) for work and other formal occasions.





### **What professional challenges did you experience whilst away?**

In terms of verbally communicating with both staff and clients, there was a significant language barrier. Though many were able to speak English, some comments, phrases or questions were often misunderstood. For clients that were unable to speak English, a staff member would usually translate and speak on behalf of the client and myself in order for us to have a conversation. As a student coming from a western country, it became evident rapidly that there was a hierarchy and as a foreigner from a western country, I felt a sense of privilege that was automatically given to me. The challenge was ensuring that I did not do or say things that took advantage of this privilege or that may come across as demeaning. The slow pace in which things would progress in my workplace setting was something I had struggled with in the beginning of my placement, as things move quickly in Australia. At times, I struggled with the differences of the policies and procedures within the agency and needed to sit with a worker to de-brief. This allowed me to shift my thinking and continue to work with an open-mind. .

### **How did you personally grow?**

In the beginning of my time in Tonga, I felt overwhelmed, ethically challenged and home sick. The culture shock is a pretty obvious response but by going as a vegan and having never left Australia prior, I was undergoing numerous inner conflicts. However, I quickly overcame these barriers that were stopping me from giving this unique experience one hundred percent, surprising myself on how resilient and adaptable I am in new environments. Through living and working independently with the support of fellow students and colleagues, I discovered a new-found confidence within myself. This confidence helped me excel better in my work placement, socialisation and self-esteem.

I developed a deeper understanding, admiration and respect for the Tongan culture, language and way of living. The simplicity of the lifestyle allowed me to find peace within myself, reduce the high levels of stress often experienced in Australia's fast-moving society and develop greater patience with both myself and others. It helped me value the authentic

things in life from seeing and being a part of a strong community connection where materialistic things are not of importance. I had the astonishing experience of swimming with whales on a number of occasions, conquering my fear of the ocean by throwing myself in the deep end (literally).

### **How will you utilise what you've learnt back home in Australia?**

It is vital for social workers that are working with people within the Tongan community who are living in Australia to understand what their reality of particular situations may be and to eliminate the western assumptions as well as ways of thinking in order to effectively provide support. There may be circumstances where clients are not aware of their rights or available services and this would have to be explained prior. When running workshops on self-esteem or positive thinking at the safe house, it was not effective for me to ask questions that were individualised or directed personally. The clients preferred to discuss quotes from the bible that made them feel empowered as they felt it was more valuable and a way for them to connect with themselves. This reiterates the importance of asking clients what works best for them and emphasises the relevance of a person-centred practice.

As stated earlier, what may seem like reliable practice in western countries may not be the best approach when working with Pacific people living in Australia. When working with a community with a Pacific Island background in Australia, I would take into consideration the implementation of some practices I viewed and used in Tonga such as the use of prayer before meetings or supplying food to encourage coming together. This could help to make Tongan clients feel more engaged, connected to their roots and ensure they are willing to engage. One of the most fundamental methods when working with communities from the Pacific is not to assume that we know what is best for them but to let them tell us how we can assist them in the best way possible.

On a personal level, I will apply the skills I have learnt in regards to resilience, strength in my current relationships and the promotion of self-care by putting less pressure on myself.



The confidence I now have is a tool I can apply to both my personal, student and work life and hope to excel further in all areas.

### **What could be done differently in the implementation of the PIFE initiative?**

During my time in Tonga, I had experienced falling off my bike and grazing a large area of both my knees as well as being stung by an unknown sea creature while swimming in the ocean. In both scenarios, there was someone close by that offered knowledgeable assistance and had a first aid kit with them. Injuries are unpredictable and mine were manageable, however, this may not always be the case. It may be effective for future students to have first aid training as a compulsory requirement to be able to respond to fellow students effectively if an injury occurs. In addition, having students pack a first aid kit with them on their travel could be beneficial as there are limited resources in Tonga.

As settling into placement in a foreign country can be difficult, it may be helpful to ensure that students are placed in the same accommodation, as it was quite challenging and lonely being in a home stay on my own. It would also be valuable if the homestays were not arranged with a local from our placement agencies, as it was difficult to establish professional boundaries and have a space to go home to where I was able to switch off. Further to this, a greater emphasis and background check on ensuring the safety of students in terms of whom they are living with and what their living conditions are like would be beneficial.

# TEAM VANUATU

# Fatme El-Cheikh Issa

## DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH AND SPORTS

“Vanuatu is a country bounded by their culture, and many of the locals I spoke to feared the loss of their culture due to westernisation and social media, and the influence it has had on its youth.”



Upon arriving in Vanuatu, I was greeted by a work colleague who placed a traditional hand-made necklace around my neck and welcomed me into her country. We were then driven to a colleague's house for a traditional ground-cooked dinner called 'Lap-lap'. On my second night, my host parents introduced us to the chief of Erakor village where we were located. We presented him with a mat my host family had created from banana leaves, which they had cut off a tree from their backyard. The chief was a wise, well-respected and knowledgeable man who had asked me why I had become silent throughout the night. He then shared the following with me: "Silence can be a great paradox: it can represent anger and frustration, but can also represent happiness and comfort," to which I wholeheartedly responded: "I am comfortable." I was overwhelmed with appreciation for the generosity that surrounded me. The first few days of settling in once you've moved away from familiarity are crucial, and the chief's words along with the welcoming I had received within those two days resonated throughout my student placement. At times when I felt homesick or was presented with challenging and unexpected situations, these strong Ni-Van values of love and support had motivated me to persevere and continue to grow and learn from this unique experience.

After settling in for a few days and spending time with our host family, we visited the Wan SmolBag Theatre Youth Centre, where we were undertaking our student placement. The youth centre tackled many areas such as nutrition, sports, sexual health and environment. They also focused on drama and acting, and soon enough I had recognised Wan SmolBags achievements across the island. Throughout the week I had participated in activities such as pottery, cooking class and sports with the youth. I had also observed one of their Hip-Hop classes, and was taken aback by the talent and effort shown by many of the young youth. I had asked one of the youth to teach me some moves, to which they reacted excitedly and began discussing amongst each other what playlist to dance to. I was partnered up with two young boys between the ages of eight to twelve, and they spent the afternoon teaching me. Although language was a barrier, it further demonstrated the power of art through music and acting, and I witnessed their passion and determination in what they do. We visited Wan Smolbags weekly fireshow at The Beach Bar almost every Friday. Shortly after, we were presented with a second placement objective, which involved creating a government proposal on suicide awareness and prevention. Many of my key activities surrounding this proposal and throughout my work placement involved meetings and discussions surrounding the topic of mental health and suicide. Since statistics were alarming, I found myself incorporating discussions of socio-economic and social work issues into every day conversations with locals and ex-pats, where I gathered much of my information and personal knowledge. Key activities outside of placement mainly involved spending time with my host family, who I grew extremely fond of. I also aimed at exploring as much of Vanuatu as I could, and this meant visiting places such as the Blue Lagoon (shown below), Cascade waterfalls and my personal favourite, the volcano at Tanna Island.

“ My connection with my host family became the greatest experience that I took back with me to Australia. ”



Undertaking my student placement in the Pacific challenged and expanded my pre-existing understanding of how culture affects different groups in society. I was charmed at the village system across Vanuatu, and how different villages operated and interacted with others. I was also intrigued at how each village carried out its own traditions and beliefs. Through research and discussions, I came to realise that there are similar patterns across other Pacific countries. Vanuatu is a country bounded by their culture, and many of the locals I spoke to feared the loss of their culture due to westernisation and social media, and the influence it has had on its youth. By undertaking my placement in the Pacific, I could apply my skills as a social worker while immersing myself into the one culture. This is an advantage I am thankful for, since it may be a challenge to gain such experience while in Australia due to its multiculturalism.

As a social worker in Vanuatu, I experienced professional challenges such as working with limited resources, practicing professional boundaries and not letting feelings of homesickness and stress affect my professional practice. The challenges I was presented with pushed me to become a greater social worker. They taught me skills in perseverance, taking initiative and trusting my own instincts. These are some of the skills that I did not anticipate to work on before my placement but nonetheless, have helped shape my identity as a social worker. Because Vanuatu was limited in resources (research, internet, libraries) I was forced to utilise other means of professional practice and mainly conducted my research through networking with members of the community. This meant that majority of my research was reliant on communicating with others and through this, I was able to build on skills of networking, e-mailing, and organising meetings. This also meant that I could build on my professional identity as a social worker. To be able to build on these skills while in a different country was a unique learning curve that I feel is an advantage to my career as a social worker. I found that researching into suicide prevention and awareness while in Vanuatu was a significantly different experience to conducting similar research in Australia. In Australia, many of the social work research topics relevant to Australia have been conducted and I have always found a good foundation to begin with. I also found that I had some indication of the magnitude of the issue. While in Vanuatu, topics such as a mental health and suicide were not generally considered and therefore, there was greater potential for research.



Before arriving in Vanuatu, I unconsciously viewed the experience regarding the work I would undertake. Upon arriving I recognised the heavy impact that other areas played on my professional and personal life. I was located with a family of six, who have become a significant part of my life. On our days off, the children would teach us to make Lap-lap, a traditional dish made from banana and coconut. We would play football, climb trees and watch movies. My host parents played a role in guiding me on my experience, and I could reflect on my daily experiences with them. When we first arrived, they provided us with food and company and made us feel comfortable. They pushed me to grow and become a wiser social worker and person. My connection with my host family became the greatest experience that I took back with me to Australia. When placement was not going as expected or I was presented with challenging situations, my host family were there to guide and support me. Because I was living independently, away from home and away from quick access to my university teachers and peers, I was forced to become more independent with my decisions. I am now more confident with taking initiative and trusting my own judgement. I have grown to become more comfortable in communicating with different parties, and have become more confident in myself as a person. I generally would not choose a position where I was mainly researching however, working in Vanuatu taught me that research plays a massive role in creating change, and without research, there is no basis for action.

The PIFE initiative has a strong and achievable goal. As a student who did not know much about the Pacific islands before embarking on the journey I now feel like I have expanded my knowledge and understanding amongst different communities existing within Australia. I am thankful that PIFE has allowed me to network with other students, travellers and community members of Vanuatu. The experience pushed me to grow and allowed me to work on skills essential to my professional career as a social worker and to my personal growth. However, as a student pioneering in Vanuatu I would have appreciated a more specific role, especially at the Wan Smolbag Theatre youth centre. Being new to a country and workforce is daunting, and I would have appreciated more points of contact as at times I struggled to find someone outside of the workforce to communicate with about significant issues. I believe this would have significantly improved my mental health while in Vanuatu. I am thankful that the PIFE initiative has allowed me to create lifelong friends and relationships.



# Jessica Lin

## DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH AND SPORTS

“ I gained a new understanding on cross-cultural work through experiencing a different culture in person rather than listening to others telling me about what their culture is like. ”

### What were the key activities undertaken on placement?

We had the opportunity to immerse ourselves into the culture of Vanuatu through accompanying agency staff to events such as weddings. This was important in placement as it enables us to implement agency services through a sense of understanding and familiarity with the community's expectations and their beliefs. We also accompanied the supervisor to multiple meetings where we were able to gain a better understanding of the working structures of Vanuatu as well as observing how they conduct their meetings compared to the western culture. One of our main tasks was to write a research proposal in our chosen area of interest. In order to validate the research proposal's paper, we were required to meet with several Ministers (Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Youth and Sports) to gather information on relevant policies and identify the gaps that may need to be addressed. Towards the end of placement we developed a services directory in Vanuatu which would provide a great source of reference for services available in Vanuatu. This included services such as the Ministries, women's centre, disability care and youth centres. .

### What did you learn from doing a social work placement in the Pacific?

Social work is not something that is understood universally. During our placement we had to sit back at one point to redefine our role as a social worker and think about what we could do for them. As social work is not something that may formally exist in Vanuatu it was very hard for us to involve ourselves within the agencies and offer our assistance on a practical level. Therefore we decided that research was the best option in order to build a structure and identifying what may

need to be addressed in order for social work to become a known term in the future. I also had to constantly ensure that I was being culturally adaptive, for example the Pacific Islander culture may be seen as generally very relaxed and easy-going with everything. This includes their attitudes towards workplace expectations as well. As a student from a western culture which is very fast paced and punctual with workplace expectations, I had to step back and reposition myself in a way that flowed with the laid-back lifestyle of Vanuatu. I have also become aware of the different ways that the Pacific community understands a certain topic compared to western culture. I felt that this was very insightful for me as it is important to be able to understand where a client's beliefs of a certain idea are shaped from. This also makes building rapport much more effective as they can feel that you are making an effort to get to know who they are. Through my research proposal (on disability) I was able to understand the extent a developing country compared to a developed country can differ in terms of policies and perceptions on things. For example, the western culture seems to be very aware of how persons with a disability can be marginalised and work on preventing that from happening. There is also a strong awareness of the different types of disabilities including the physical, social and mental aspect and there are endless support services for them. Through my research however, I found that Vanuatu did not show as much awareness of the mental or social aspect of disability compared to the physical aspect. It is important to acknowledge that when you are working with people of different cultures, it is necessary to be aware of what their definition of a certain topic is and that will help shape your role as a social worker for that individual.



### What professional challenges did you experience whilst away?

As mentioned, I experienced Pacific Islander culture as being very laid back and relaxed with everything, and they like to usually go with the flow. This also meant that things such as meeting times and dates were very flexible. I found it slightly difficult to get used to as I was so used to being on time with meetings and finalising a set date. Although I understood that it was their lifestyle and for them it is very common, there were times which I felt it was difficult for me to adapt to. I feel that it may be because I have always grown up being taught to be punctual and be prepared and set times and dates for things. Failure to do so would have a negative reaction from others and therefore I grew up with the idea that if I did not plan things properly I would disappoint people. I feel that the feeling of not wanting to disappoint people has been imbedded in me and therefore triggers an automatic reaction to feeling the need to do things 'right'. I feel this is what influenced my struggle to become used to the laid back culture of Vanuatu. It has also allowed me to understand how these same situations could happen with clients we may be working with in the future who come from different cultures and who may have been experiencing the same thing as me.

### How did you personally grow?

While in Vanuatu I did not have a lot of luxuries that I had back in Australia and people in Vanuatu were very easy going and content with what they had. It prompted me to realise how a more simpler life could make anyone happy and be content if they wanted to. I came back to Australia being more appreciative of what I have grown up with and the luxuries that I have been given. I also came back with an even more open-minded attitude towards my interactions with friends and families. I felt that I wanted to make sure I understood their point of view and where their opinions are shaped from. As I was learning something new every day in Vanuatu such as speaking their national language, figuring out how to get to and from places and exploring new places, I came back feeling more confident. I gained a new understanding on cross-cultural work through experiencing a different culture in person rather than listening to others telling me about what their culture is like. The first-hand experience has provided me with a very valuable learning opportunity. I feel that learning experiences are much more effective when you are able to experience it in person and therefore strengthens your ability to critically analyse things.

### How will you utilise what you've learnt back home in Australia?

When working with clients in the future I hope to be able to show that I am genuinely interested in understanding how they define certain topics and what their beliefs are. I feel that Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) individuals in particular may struggle with settling into their lifestyle in a different country when the people in it do not try to understand them. Through my research proposal on disability that I wrote, I have understood disability in the context of Vanuatu. I would like to ensure that I am able to develop and utilise a diverse understanding towards disability and continue to learn what disability may mean for individuals from cultures other than the western culture.

### What could be done differently in the implementation of the PIFE initiative?

It may be useful to discuss with the placement agencies exactly what the student could be involved in doing in advance before their arrival to the places. This will ensure that time is not spent on figuring out what the students could do after their arrival to the placement agency. Ensuring that a pre-placement interview is taken place may also help the student and the supervisor to discuss what tasks they could undertake in the placement and for the student to communicate with them what they hope to get out of the placement. As research ended up enabling me to learn a lot of things in a different culture, it may provide future students with a valuable learning experience too. If they do decide to do research I feel it would be useful to discuss with the onsite supervisor in advance what they could do to help the research become more valid. For example scheduling interviews with the Ministers to ask them questions regarding existing policies could be useful. Additionally it is helpful to also provide the student constant guidance on the structure of their research and checking on their progress on a frequent basis.



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