



## **Australian Government**

Australian Government response to the  
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and  
Trade report:

Pursuing the Priorities of the Pacific: Inquiry into Australia's  
alignment with the priorities of Pacific Island countries

October 2025

## Introduction

The Australian Government welcomes the opportunity to respond to the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade: Foreign Affairs and Aid Sub-committee (the Sub-committee) on its *Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region*.

The Government has carefully considered the report and accepts in full, in principle or partially the majority of the recommendations by the Sub-committee. The Government appreciates the work of the Sub-committee and recognises the valuable contributions made to the inquiry by all who provided submissions and testimony.

Australia's relationships with Pacific island countries are long-standing and enduring based on true partnerships, respect and friendship. These relationships are critical to Australia's national interests and national identity, recognising our shared geography, history and culture and the deeply interconnected nature of our security and prosperity. Australia and Pacific island countries share an ocean and a future as custodians of the Blue Pacific Continent. The Government's engagement in the Pacific aims to support national sovereignty and democracy, promote prosperity and development, uphold regional unity, and foster peace and security.

The Government started its first term with a commitment to bring new energy, resources and respect to the Pacific and to listen and respond to Pacific priorities and needs. Successive budgets have reinforced this commitment, including through record levels of official development assistance (\$2.15 billion in 2025-26) and our \$1.9 billion Enhancing Pacific Engagement package announced as part of the 2023-24 budget.

We have forged and implemented ground-breaking agreements with Tuvalu, Nauru, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands. These agreements embody the Government's commitment to being the Pacific's partner of choice, responding to Pacific priorities with tailored solutions and backing Pacific-led approaches to collective prosperity and security. On 6 October, Prime Minister Albanese and PNG Prime Minister Marape signed the Papua New Guinea-Australia Mutual Defence Treaty (Pukpuk Treaty). The Treaty elevates the defence relationship between PNG and Australia to the status of an Alliance – Australia's first new Alliance in 74 years after the United States and New Zealand. Our new Alliance reflects our commitment to each other and to a region that is peaceful, stable and prosperous. The strategic trust we share also facilitated a game-changing innovation in our partnership with the Australian Government's commitment to a ten year, \$600 million, partnership with the PNG Government and the Australian Rugby League Commission to support a PNG team to enter the National Rugby League competition from 2028.

The Nauru-Australia Treaty for closer relations entered into force on 19 September 2025, elevating our unique and long-standing relationship to an integrated economic, social and security partnership. The Treaty has delivered major transformational outcomes, including ensuring a continued physical banking presence and access to the international financial market for Nauruans with the commencement of operations by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia on 18 August 2025. Nauru and Australia will also expand our security cooperation, committing to consult on developments that threaten our collective sovereignty, peace or stability. To underpin this commitment, we will mutually agree any engagement by others in

Nauru's security, banking and telecommunications sectors.

The Australian Government continues to deliver on its commitments under the Falepili Union with Tuvalu, demonstrating what Australia and the Pacific can do together when we work hand in hand for our shared future. The Falepili mobility pathway ballot was drawn for the first time on 25 July 2025, providing Tuvaluans an unprecedented opportunity to live, work and study in Australia.

In response to a request by Solomon Islands, the Australian and Solomon Islands Governments announced a new package of support for the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) on 20 December 2024. Guided by Solomon Islands' priorities, the four-year package will grow the size and capability of the RSIPF through funding, training and infrastructure support, including the design and later construction of a new fit-for-purpose Police Academy in Honiara. The Australian Government continues to support Solomon Islands' evolving security priorities, which reinforces our view, and the view of Pacific Islands Forum Leaders, that Pacific security is best handled by the Pacific.

These long-term, unique investments complement Australia's broader Pacific partnerships and are designed to make our region more prosperous, secure, and resilient. The Government thanks the Sub-committee for its work in preparing this report and considering the submissions.

## Response to the recommendations

### Recommendation 1

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government continues to work towards securing bipartisan support for the international development program, including through indexation, for the long-term growth of the aid program.*

**Response:**

*The Government accepts this recommendation.*

The Australian Government recognises the importance of securing bipartisan support to ensure the long-term sustainability and growth of the international development program. Indexation of the official development assistance (ODA) budget aligns with the Government's commitment to delivering predictable and sustained support to our Indo-Pacific partnerships and broader global efforts.

To support bipartisan engagement and awareness, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is leveraging initiatives such as the Australian Regional Leadership Initiative to build informed policy support by showcasing the positive impacts of international development through evidence-driven insights targeted at Australian parliamentarians. DFAT's partnerships with policy-relevant think tanks have produced public-facing research and analysis that examine the link between Australia's development assistance and its broader foreign policy and national interest. This analysis is targeted at, and helps to inform and influence, the broader national security and international affairs policy community and the decisionmakers within it. This analysis aims to build a broader understanding among parliamentary and government decision makers about the value and impact of Australia's development program as a tool of statecraft.

DFAT is also actively exploring new initiatives that bolster public understanding and bipartisan support for Australia's international development program through education, transparency, strategic partnerships and media engagement.

These efforts will help to strengthen parliamentary understanding and secure bipartisan support for the international development program, ensuring Australia remains a trusted and responsive partner in the Pacific and beyond.

### Recommendation 2

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, following consultations with Australian non-government organisations and Pacific Civil Society Organisations, prioritises funding for Civil Society Organisations within the Official Development Assistance budget.*

**Response:**

*The Government accepts this recommendation.*

The Government recognises the importance of civil society and non-government organisations (NGOs) to sustainable development. NGOs and civil society organisations are critical partners for Australia's international development and humanitarian response programs. They are also important development actors in their own right.

The Government has committed to a Civil Society Partnerships Fund that will support civil society organisations (CSOs) and address the challenges of shrinking civic space in many

parts of the world. As a key priority, the Government has committed \$35 million over four years for activities to improve access to civic space, working closely with CSOs across our region. DFAT will continue to consult with a range of stakeholders on the design of this Fund.

The Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) is the Australian Government's longest running and largest NGO program with \$143 million allocated in 2025-26. The ANCP supports Australian NGOs and local partners to deliver projects globally and across the Pacific including in health, education, food security and civil society strengthening.

The Government notes the Committee's findings that "Vital though CSOs are to the prosperity of the region and the wellbeing of its peoples, the Committee also recognises other avenues for ODA must be maintained. The exact balance between local, bilateral, and multilateral funding, as well as the ways in which ODA is allocated across different sectors, will be an ongoing project for DFAT. As such, the Committee does not consider it appropriate to commit to specific allocations of ODA by sector and will continue to examine options to work with all relevant stakeholders, including Australian NGOs, in meeting objectives laid out in development partnership plans."

### **Recommendation 3**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government examines the share of Overseas Development Assistance received by for-profit managing contractors, with a view to increasing the share received by Pacific civil society organisations and Australian non-government organisations.*

#### **Response:**

*The Government notes this recommendation.*

The Government recognises the important role that different types of delivery partners play in delivering Australia's ODA. There is no formula or fixed allocation to different types of delivery partners. DFAT chooses delivery partners for its development investments based on careful assessments of who is best placed to achieve the objectives and deliver the results we are seeking.

Using a range of delivery partners, including multilateral organisations, NGOs, partner governments, other Australian Government organisations, universities and academic institutions and contractors allows DFAT to deliver the program efficiently and effectively and reflects that different types of delivery partners offer different strengths.

Where a large (more than \$500,000) development program or investment is being contracted, DFAT uses open and competitive procurement as its default process. This means that any type of organisation can bid for these contracts. Australian NGOs can, and do, bid for contracts in Australia's development program. Australian NGOs are also sub-contracted by larger managing contractors. In 2023-24, \$502 million was provided to Australian NGOs to implement programs through subcontracts.

Managing contractors also generate significant local employment opportunities and opportunities for local businesses supplying goods and services in partner countries. In 2023-24, 4,839 local staff were employed under programs delivered by managing contractors and \$681 million was provided in subcontracts to local organisations in partner countries.

#### **Recommendation 4**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government respond to the stated priority of the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Government and increase support through overseas development assistance via PNG or directly to YWAM to enable the life extension of the YWAM Medical Ship.*

**Response:**

*The Government accepts this recommendation.*

Australia's development program in PNG is guided by the Australia – Papua New Guinea Development Partnership Plan 2024-2029 developed in close consultation with the PNG Government and responding to the PNG Government's health priorities. There are Australian-funded health projects in every PNG province as well as the Autonomous Region of Bougainville.

Youth with a Mission Medical Ships (YWAM MS) plays a role as a delivery partner for Australia's development program, supporting primary health care in some rural areas.

The Australian Government provided a contribution of \$4 million in 2024-25 to the repair and refit of the YWAM vessel, MV YWAM PNG, to enable it to continue operating and delivering health services to rural populations in PNG.

Australia also provides funding to YWAM MS to deliver primary healthcare in PNG's Western Province. This includes new funding of \$1.26 million (for April to December 2025), which builds on earlier funding of \$1.40 million for the period May 2023 to March 2025 and \$1 million for COVID-19 vaccination activities in 2021 and 2022.

In total, the Australian Government is providing over \$7.6 million in funding to YWAM MS over a four-year period (2021-2025).

#### **Recommendation 5**

*The Committee recommends that where Pacific Island countries and Pacific civil society organisations seek to access climate finance, the Australian Government, having made a contribution to the Loss and Damage Fund for Developing Countries:*

- *take steps to improve and streamline the process*
- *advocate globally for the creation of more equitable climate finance arrangements, in consultation with affected communities, with a view to facilitating access by the most vulnerable communities across the Pacific and elsewhere*
- *consider support for the establishment of, funding for, and advocating for other institutional donors to support locally-managed climate finance and climate adaptation funds to support quick and targeted dispersal, including the Pacific Resilience Fund*
- *explore other measures to improve access to climate finance for the most vulnerable and most effected by climate change in the Pacific.*

**Response:**

*The Government accepts this recommendation.*

A key priority for Australia is securing and enhancing access to climate finance for those countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, particularly Pacific island countries. This includes advocacy which is informed by Pacific consultation and seeks to enhance and streamline processes to access climate finance managed by the Global Environment Facility and Green Climate Fund (GCF) – funds which play an important catalytic role in advancing systemic change while mobilising additional finance.

Australia has re-engaged with the GCF through a \$50 million contribution to the second GCF replenishment (2024-27) and as a GCF Board member in 2025. Through this role, Australia is advocating for and supporting streamlining measures and enhancing Pacific access to GCF Readiness funding to strengthen institutional capacities, governance mechanisms, and planning and programming frameworks towards a long-term climate action agenda. A new GCF Executive Director is driving strong reforms, focusing on simplifying accreditation and project approval processes, including a commitment to move projects from concept to approval in nine months or less (a key criticism from the Pacific is the time taken from concept to approval stages). We acknowledge that over the past year the GCF has made tangible efforts to engage with, and work better, with the Pacific and small island developing states (SIDs) more broadly, resulting in a quadrupling of approved Pacific projects so far in 2025 to over USD225 million and 12 per cent of the GCF global approvals. The GCF Executive Director has increased engagement with the Pacific, including Mafalda's participation in the Pacific Island Forum Leaders Meeting in 2024 and the SIDs conference on "Charting the Course Toward Resilient Prosperity" in 2024 in Antigua and Barbuda.

Australia has pledged \$50 million to the Fund for responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD). Australia joined the Board in July 2025 and is working closely with Board members, particularly those from Cook Islands, Fiji, New Zealand, Timor Leste and Vanuatu to support Pacific engagement and access. The FRLD is being operationalised with key decisions including the adoption of a Resource Allocation Framework and parameters still to be taken. Australia will continue to work constructively with Board members to pursue outcomes that support Pacific interests.

Australia was pleased to join with fellow Pacific Islands Forum Leaders in signing the Pacific Resilience Facility Establishment Treaty at the Forum leaders meeting in Honiara in September 2025. Australia has pledged a foundational \$100 million contribution to the Pacific Resilience Facility. As a Pacific-led, owned and managed financing facility, the Facility will provide grants for climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, nature-based solutions and projects which respond to loss and damage. Funding from other donors will be required to meet the Pacific's initial fundraising goal of USD500 million.

These specific efforts in supporting engagement with global climate funds comes in addition to the Government's strengthening of our contribution to global climate finance goals. The Government increased Australia's climate finance contribution from \$2 billion to \$3 billion for the period 2020-2025.

## **Recommendation 6**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government commits to identify any future climate finance contributions within the Overseas Development Assistance budget by 2026-27.*

### **Response:**

*The Government accepts this recommendation.*

The Government's current climate finance commitment covers the period 2020-25. The Government expects to have delivered \$3 billion in climate finance over that period. The Government will consider a new climate finance commitment in due course.

The International Development Policy released in August 2023 commits Australia to strengthening climate resilience across our international development program by:

- ensuring that from 2024-25, at least half of all new country and regional investments valued over \$3 million have a climate change objective – rising to 80 per cent in 2028-29;
- considering climate risk in all bilateral and regional Development Partnership Plans; and
- aligning bilateral programs with partners' Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans.

## **Recommendation 7**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government publicly commits to ensure that no Overseas Development Assistance will be spent on fossil fuel projects in the Pacific by 2026–27. This policy should be implemented in consultation with Pacific Island Forum leaders.*

### **Response:**

*The Government accepts in principle this recommendation.*

The Australian Government has set a clear direction for the alignment of our international public support with the clean energy transition. On 5 December 2023 at COP28 in Dubai, the Australian Government joined the Statement on International Public Support for the Clean Energy Transition (known as the Glasgow Statement or Clean Energy Transition Partnership (CETP)). As a member to the CETP, the Australian Government will not finance new international unabated fossil fuel energy sector projects from 5 December 2024, except in limited and clearly defined circumstances. Australia's CETP Guidelines (published on 5 December 2024) clearly outline the Government's policy for the provision of international public support. The Guidelines state that Australia's ODA, including that provided by the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), falls in scope of the CETP commitment.

The Government's CETP commitment is consistent with Australia's commitments as a member of the Pacific Islands Forum, including to transition away from coal, oil and gas in our energy systems, in line with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change pathways for limiting global average temperatures to 1.5 degrees above preindustrial levels. This was consulted with and agreed by Forum Leaders in the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum Communique in November 2023. Forum Members have also committed to the

establishment of a regional Energy Commissioner for a Just Transition to a Fossil Fuel Free Pacific.

Some AIFFP projects will require use of the National Interest Exemption where projects support the energy transition but may require supplementary use of fossil fuels. This would only apply where projects support Pacific island countries' (and Timor Leste's) transition to renewable energy and therefore should not conflict with the overall intent of Australia's commitment under the CETP.

Climate change is prioritised in Australia's International Development Policy which guides Australia's development program and ODA. Specifically, the Development Policy commits to increasing climate investments and better addressing climate risks.

### **Recommendation 8**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government use its position on the International Seabed Authority Council to seek robust regulatory arrangements with the strongest possible environmental protections before seabed mining commences.*

**Response:**

*The Government accepts this recommendation.*

As a member of the International Seabed Authority (ISA) Council, Australia is an active participant in the negotiations on the Exploitation Regulations, attending each of the Council meetings as well as facilitating intersessional work.

Australia's position is that mining of the deep seabed beyond national jurisdiction should not commence until a comprehensive and robust regulatory framework is in place, negotiated through the International Seabed Authority (ISA) in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). We are focused on achieving a regulatory framework that provides for assessment of potential environmental impacts based on scientific evidence, includes strong environmental protections and includes robust inspection, compliance and enforcement mechanisms.

### **Recommendation 9**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government considers options to strengthen the Australian National Contact Point for Responsible Business Conduct (AusNCP), including by:*

- *increasing funding for the AusNCP*
- *introducing additional powers to enable the AusNCP to investigate and sanction Australian corporations for human rights and environmental violations overseas.*

**Response:**

*The Government notes this recommendation.*

The Australian National Contact Point for Responsible Business Conduct (AusNCP) is a function provided by The Treasury to fulfil Australia's obligations under the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Declaration on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises. The Declaration includes the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct (OECD Guidelines). These

are voluntary principles and standards on responsible business conduct for multinational enterprises, covering areas such as human rights, the environment, governance and employment.

The AusNCP's functions include:

- promoting the OECD Guidelines and recommending to multinational enterprises operating in or from Australia that they observe the OECD Guidelines; and
- serving as a non-judicial grievance mechanism to contribute to the resolution of issues raised about the conduct of multinational enterprises operating in or from Australia, in relation to the OECD Guidelines.

The Government will take Recommendation 9 into account when making future decisions about the AusNCP's resourcing and operations.

### **Recommendation 10**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government considers Terms of Reference and governance frameworks for the potential funding and partnership with Australian academic institutions to build the capacity of local actors to undertake surveys, including, where appropriate, into community attitudes and perceptions.*

#### **Response:**

*The Government accepts in principle this recommendation.*

Research capacity and relationships between institutions are critical to establishing and maintaining a vibrant research network that can underpin evidence-based policy making.

The Government is funding and partnering with Australian academic institutions to build the capacity of Pacific actors to engage and understand local communities, including:

- the **Pacific Research Program – Phase 2 (PRP II)** (\$27.8 million over four years) partners the Australian National University and Lowy Institute with the Pacific higher education sector to invest in the next generation of Pacific researchers, including via research collaboration on the Pacific Attitudes Survey and large scale longitudinal surveys in the region; and
- the **Australia Awards program** provides scholarships and short courses to undertake university study, research and professional development in Australia and the Pacific. Since 2017, over 5,000 Pacific recipients have been offered a long-term scholarship and participated in short courses. Fellowships Round 19 of the Australia Awards Fellowships program funded seven Australian universities (nine programs) to host 93 Fellows from the Pacific, positioning them to advance development outcomes in the following Priority Areas: health, digital economy, climate change and Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI). In total, round 19 funded 141 Fellows from the Pacific across 16 Australian Host Organisations. Fellowships Round 20 will see approximately 142 Fellows from the Pacific funded across 13 Australian Organisations, including five Australian Universities supporting Pacific Fellows across the Priority Areas. Since 2017, Australia has provided in-depth leadership training to over 258 emerging Pacific women leaders through the [Australia Awards Women Leading and Influencing](#) program.

The Government is partnering with a range of Pacific higher education institutions with the objective of supporting greater research capacity in the region. For example, our long-standing partnership with the University of South Pacific (\$86 million 2019-25) has supported the signing of 10 Memorandums of Understanding/agreements between Australian universities and individual Pacific universities. These agreements help to deepen Pacific research capacity and support a vibrant research network in the region.

An independent evaluation of PRP II is now underway, which will inform future decisions, including consideration of ways to deepen linkages between a broader range of Pacific and Australian higher education institutions.

### **Recommendation 11**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government—in close consultation with affected communities, national governments, and regional structures, and building on the successes of the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union—seeks opportunities to strengthen existing mobility pathways and consider additional options to support other Pacific communities, including those affected by climate change.*

#### **Response:**

*The Government accepts in principle this recommendation.*

The Australian Government is working closely with our Pacific partners on ways to deepen links and strengthen regional and bilateral cooperation on shared challenges and opportunities. Each Pacific island country has a unique relationship with Australia.

The Government understands how important mobility is to economic development and staying connected and how establishing new economic opportunities can build resilience among communities affected by climate change.

As a member of the Pacific Islands Forum, Australia endorsed the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility in 2023 – an important milestone establishing regional principles to navigate the complexity of climate mobility.

The Framework outlines principles for staying in place, planned relocation, migration and displacement through a proactive, inclusive and collaborative regional approach, while respecting national sovereignty and diversity. The implementation plan to underpin this Framework was endorsed by Forum Members in 2025.

The Government is working with the region to support the Framework including through Australia's ongoing climate adaptation and resilience programs, which help people remain in their communities and retain their social and cultural identity.

Australia does not provide a climate change visa, rather our priority is to strengthen community resilience and support persons impacted by climate change in the Pacific, enabling them to remain in their community. For instance, the Government is committed to working with the Pacific to address the health impacts of climate change by strengthening Pacific health system capacity to support climate resilience and adaptation as part of the Pacific Climate and Health Resilience Package.

The Government will continue to engage Pacific partners on ways to build on our deep cultural and people-to-people links. Since 2022, the Government has invested in new mobility opportunities, streamlined visa arrangements and improved access for Pacific island countries. This includes introducing the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV),

commencing a family accompaniment pilot for long-term workers in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, exempting Pacific students from increases to the Student Visa Application Charge (VAC), prioritising Pacific access to faster and cheaper mobile biometrics testing, and establishing dedicated Pacific Service Centre arrangements to reduce Pacific Visitor Visa processing times from 43 days in October 2022 to 5 days in August 2025.

The Falepili Union special mobility pathway is another way the Government is enhancing mobility options that cater to specific needs through bilateral arrangements. The Government is open to approaches from other countries on how we can enhance our partnerships.

### **Recommendation 12**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government reviews at least every three years key Pacific mobility schemes, including the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme and the Pacific Engagement Visa, with a view to:*

- *identifying issues faced by participants in Australia and upon return to their communities*
- *evaluating the impact of these schemes on Pacific communities, families, and particularly on children*
- *identifying and implementing measures to address any negative impacts of mobility schemes on participants and communities of origin.*

#### **Response:**

*The Government partially accepts this recommendation.*

The Australian Government is committed to the successful delivery of the PALM scheme and the PEV program. The Government undertakes periodic evaluation of the PALM scheme and PEV program to ensure both programs deliver on these outcomes.

#### PALM scheme

Worker wellbeing is of the highest priority for the Australian Government. The Government has committed \$440 million across successive budgets (2022-27) to expand and improve the PALM scheme, including to better protect and support workers while in Australia. For example, following concerns raised by workers and sending countries about the negative impacts of long periods of family separation, the Government is undertaking, and closely monitoring a Family Accompaniment pilot that will allow up to 200 workers to bring their families to Australia.

The PALM scheme has in-built mechanisms around worker welfare, assurance and compliance that assists to identify labour mobility issues or impacts that may need to be addressed. The Government regularly commissions research and undertakes monitoring and evaluation activities of the PALM scheme to strengthen the program and mitigates impacts on workers and communities. This includes:

- in 2023, the Government commissioned an independent evaluation to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of funding into the Pacific Labour Facility (PLF)<sup>1</sup>;
- funding for the Australian National University and World Bank to conduct the first and second phase of the Pacific Mobility Survey – a longitudinal study that examines a number of areas related to the PALM scheme including the economic and social impacts on workers and sending countries; and
- targeted research and evaluation activities on the social and economic impacts of specific sending countries and PALM programs.

#### Pacific Engagement Visa

The PEV program commenced in 2024 and has an inbuilt formal evaluation process three years into the program's operation. The evaluation will assess the effectiveness of the PEV program, including the settlement outcomes for those who are granted a visa and migrate to Australia. This is expected to be conducted in mid-2027.

In addition, the PEV program will be actively monitored throughout the program's operation, including through other formal and informal evaluations and domestic and international consultations. Program monitoring will identify settlement and other migration issues faced by PEV holders in Australia, evaluate the impact of the PEV on Pacific communities and identify measures to adjust PEV program settings to improve the migration outcomes for PEV holders and Pacific communities.

#### **Recommendation 13**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government explores opportunities to establish more affordable and cost-effective short-term visa pathways for Pacific academics.*

#### **Response:**

*The Government notes this recommendation.*

The Australian Government has heard the calls from the Pacific for greater access and easier movement around the region and understands how important facilitating travel is to economic development and staying connected.

Since 2022, the Government has invested in new mobility opportunities, streamlined visa arrangements, and improved access for Pacific island countries. This includes introducing the PEV, commencing a family accompaniment pilot for long-term workers in the PALM scheme, exempting Pacific students from increases to the Student VAC implemented from 1 July 2024, prioritising Pacific access to faster and cheaper mobile biometrics testing, and establishing dedicated Pacific Service Centre arrangements to reduce Pacific Visitor Visa processing times from 43 days in October 2022 to 5 days in August 2025.

More specifically, there are visa pathways in place to support academics visiting Australia. Academics who have been invited to observe or participate in an Australian research project at an Australian tertiary or research institution, usually in collaboration with other

<sup>1</sup> The PLF was initially responsible for the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) from October 2018. In November 2021 the PLS was merged with the Seasonal Worker Program to become the PALM scheme. In May 2022, the Government announced that domestic operations of the PALM scheme would be moved to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (including PLS functions that were previously managed by PLF). In January 2024, the PLF took on responsibility for offshore PALM scheme support.

academics employed there, may apply for a Temporary Activity (subclass 408) visa. This visa permits stays of up to 2 years in Australia for the visa applicant who may also include their family members in the visa application.

Additionally, academics working for foreign governments may not be required to pay a VAC for a Visitor (subclass 600) visa when travelling for business purposes. For those academics who are not travelling in an official foreign government capacity who seek to visit Australia for purposes such as to attend a conference, business meeting etc., they may be eligible for the grant of a Visitor (subclass 600) visa valid for up to 3 years with a maximum stay period per visit of 3 months.

The Government also undertakes initiatives that support Pacific academics' engagement with the Australian higher education sector such as via research grants and existing partnerships with Pacific higher education institutions. These partnerships aim to support greater collaboration and educational linkages with Australian universities, which may include public speaking events and visits to Australia for Pacific academics.

#### **Recommendation 14**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government considers extending the New Colombo Plan to include postgraduate students.*

**Response:**

*The Government notes this recommendation.*

The New Colombo Plan (NCP) provides pathways for Australian undergraduate university students to develop their Indo-Pacific capability and Asia literacy through immersive, structured learning and internships in our region.

Under the Financial Framework (Supplementary Powers) Regulations 1997 Schedule 1AB, the NCP is mandated to provide benefits exclusively to Australian undergraduate students.

In July 2025, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon Penny Wong, announced the next phase of the NCP. As part of the reforms, the Pacific is a priority region under the NCP Mobility Program, with support for four to nine week credit-bearing experiences which may include structured learning, internships, mentorships, practicums, and/or research.

These reforms will also increase the number of scholarships to 500 annually by 2028, introduce a new Semester Program to encourage longer-term study and establish a program-wide language learning target focused on priority Asian languages.

#### **Recommendation 15**

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government considers significantly lifting the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) cap for upcoming years and explores opportunities to expand the PEV to other Pacific countries, where sufficient demand exists.*

**Response:**

*The Government accepts in principle this recommendation.*

The Australian Government is committed to the successful implementation of the PEV which includes offering up to 3,000 visa places each year to countries across the region that are in-scope to participate.

In the first instance, the PEV has been made available to independent Pacific island countries that do not have an automatic citizenship pathway with New Zealand, the United States or France.

Participation in the PEV is on an annual opt-in basis. The Government undertook extensive consultations with all in-scope countries and understands some countries require further time to consider their participation in the program. The opportunity will remain open for countries in-scope to join ballots in future PEV program years.

The PEV has an in-built formal evaluation process three years into the program's operation. This is expected to be conducted in mid-2027. The PEV is a new program for Australia and a new migration pathway for the Pacific and Timor-Leste. Noting the second year of this new and innovative program only commenced in July 2025, we will continue to review program settings and make any necessary adjustments in due course, taking into account lessons learned.

## Glossary

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| ABC             | Australian Broadcasting Corporation   |
| ARLI            | Australian Regional Leadership Initiative                                     |
| AusNCP          | The Australian National Contact Point for Responsible Business Conduct        |
| CETP            | Clean Energy Transition Partnership   |
| CSO             | Civil Society Organisation  |
| DFAT            | Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade                                       |
| FRLD            | Fund for responding to Loss and Damage  |
| GCF             | Green Climate Fund  |
| ISA             | International Seabed Authority  |
| NGOs            | Non-government organisation   |
| OECD            | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development                        |
| OECD Guidelines | OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct |
| ODA             | Official Development Assistance   |
| PALM            | Pacific Australia Labour Mobility   |
| PEV             | Pacific Engagement Visa   |
| PIF             | Pacific Islands Forum   |
| PLF             | Pacific Labour Facility   |
| PLS             | Pacific Labour Scheme   |
| PNG             | Papua New Guinea  |
| PRP II          | Pacific Research Program – Phase 2  |
| RSIPF           | Royal Solomon Islands Police Force  |
| VAC             | Visa Application Charge   |
| YWAM MS         | Youth with a Mission Medical Ships  |