

## Speech for the Univ. Goroka Teacher Conference 2025, July 5 2025

*Catherine Ris*

*Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of New Caledonia*

*Co-chair of PIURN*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bonjour à toutes et à tous,

Across the dispersed Islands of the Pacific, education must never be seen in isolation.

To train our teachers is to interlace connections — between territories, between disciplines, and between generations.

It is both a responsibility and a great opportunity to create cohesion where distance, diversity, and disconnection often prevail.

As President of the University of New Caledonia — and as an economist whose research has focused on education and inequality — I would like today to offer some concrete paths to strengthen a bold, grounded, and inclusive cooperation in education across our region.

Let us begin with a simple truth: **knowledge is power** — the power to develop, to innovate, to adapt.

It determines the wealth of nations, the competitiveness of businesses, and the cohesion of societies.

The development of tomorrow rests on the education we deliver today.

We all face urgent, shared challenges: climate vulnerability, public health, food security, digital exclusion, and the need for qualified human resources.

And behind all of these, lies a fundamental and powerful catalyst: **education**.

It is worth reminding ourselves — again and again — that education is an investment.

It has costs, yes. But the benefits, both private and public, are huge.

From a personal position, education boosts employment, earnings, and health outcomes.

In most countries, one additional year of education is showed to increase economic output by 3 to 6%.

But beyond the numbers, education fosters resilience.

It helps individuals navigate adversity, develop self-discipline, engage socially, and fostering well-being.

From a collective position, education leads to innovation. It strengthens productivity.

It supports social cohesion and reduces healthcare costs.

In short: **Education is among the most cost-effective public investments, we can make.**

Now let me turn to the sixth conference of the Pacific Islands Universities Regional Network — PIURN — whose I have just attended in Lae, thanks to the remarkable hospitality of PNG Unitech. PIURN is a growing network of 16 universities from Pacific region, among them 6 universities from PNG.

This event brought together nearly 200 academics, among them colleagues from the university of Goroka, and showcased powerful insights, especially around education.

Not all the presentations concern education, but lots of them focus on education challenges in our pacific region. And this was very inspiring.

Let me briefly highlight the main themes that we discussed in the last few days:

1. **Quality Education and Human Resource Development** — from early literacy to higher education's role in fostering leadership and well-being.
2. **Science Technology engineering and maths (STEM) Education** — including the training of science teachers, innovative textbook design, and interdisciplinary approaches like sport and science.

3. **Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Integration** — valuing local worldviews, and teaching physics with cultural intelligence.
4. **Gender and Inclusion** — ensuring that reforms take identity and equity into account.
5. **Digital Innovation** — exploring the promise and perils of technology and AI in Pacific education systems.
6. **Climate Education** — using both scientific and traditional knowledge to empower our communities to adapt and advocate.

Those are many themes which focus was on during the conference.

So you can see how education was central to the research works presented at this Pacific wide conference, making it clear that we share the same challenges regarding education.

### **So, why must we cooperate?**

Because the challenges we face are common: geographic isolation, limited teacher supply, unmet school health needs, digital gaps.

But also because we don't only share the challenges, **the solutions can also be shared.**

Cooperation saves time. It sparks creativity. It multiplies impact.

**Together, we are stronger.**

Stronger to create knowledge for our region.

Stronger to train the next generation.

Let me now offer five concrete avenues for regional cooperation in teacher education and research:

---

#### **1. The first one is Strengthen Educational Research Networks**

Because research is a key issue when it comes to improving quality.

It could be through PIURN, or through the very new Pacific academy of sciences we launched last year.

Let us build a structured, regional higher education program.

PIURN is a powerful asset. It brings together universities working on shared priorities — education, climate, health, inclusion. They are all highly related.

We could propose:

- Launching comparative education projects, with a focus on teacher training.
- Creating PIURN-led studies on inclusive teaching, language policies, or curriculum reform.
- Supporting young researchers through regional doctoral schools.
- Establishing a PIURN thematic group on “Education and Territories,” publishing an annual regional report.

---

## **2. The second path is Expanding Academic Exchanges and Joint Training**

Let our universities become platforms for cooperation.

We can:

- Co-develop online modules for remote schools.
- Encourage teacher-trainer mobility via some of the existing programs, like Erasmus+.
- Launch co-accredited Master’s degrees — for instance, in “Education and Pacific Island Contexts.”

And why not formalize a **Pacific consortium of Deans of school of education?**

---

## **3. the third avenue is Mobilizing Regional and International Funding**

Opportunities already exist, though the Pacific Fund, ADB grants, UNESCO, and even Horizon Europe for overseas countries and territories.

We propose setting up a **shared project development office** across Pacific universities, which could be hosted by PIURN, to craft strong, collaborative funding proposals.

---

#### **4. the fourth avenue is Embracing Educational Technologies Realistically**

Let us pool digital resources, develop multilingual MOOC platforms, and support local EdTech innovations, lots already exist, let's create an efficient tool to share them.

One example: the *Nations of Water* project, a 52 min documentary, which is a powerful educational tool about climate migration, combining science and storytelling in the Pacific.

We propose a **regional digital platform** co-managed by universities — a hub for trainers, student-teachers, and school educators.

---

#### **5. and for the last one avenue of reflection: Don't Forget the Essentials: Health and Indigenous Knowledge**

First: **Health**. A student who learns well, is a healthy student.

We know, and the EU-supported FALAH project works on that, that nutrition improves concentration and academic success.

We propose health modules in teacher training — on hygiene, nutrition, and psychosocial support — and the creation of a PIURN “Education & Health” group.

Second: **Indigenous Knowledge**.

Let us connect academic learning with what is lived, observed, and taught in families and communities.

This dialogue between traditional knowledge and scientific research builds trust and develops critical thinking — a core mission of higher education.

---

**To conclude :**

What's important, is to build on what already exists, not to recreate new networks or structures, or to multiply dispersed resources; this makes each one less useful.

In the Pacific region, our challenges are the same, our needs are the same.

Let's share our resources and develop them.

Cooperation is not about adding up our weaknesses.

It is about multiplying our strengths.

We have to value our diversities, of languages, of cultures, within our countries, those make our wealth.

The networks exist. The funding exists. The political will is growing.

What remains, is for **us** to take the lead.

To create interfaces. To dare to undertake projects.

And above all, to **represent cooperation** — in our teaching, in our research, and in our leadership.

**Thank you.**

**Je vous remercie pour votre attention.**