

Vanuatu

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Introduction

The Republic of Vanuatu, formally known as the New Hebrides, is an archipelago of some eighty islands that lie roughly in a Y-shape. This group of islands spans almost 1,100 kilometres from the southern Matthew and Hunter islands to the northern Banks and Torres group.

The islands vary in size, with the twelve largest accounting for most of the total land area. The islands' topography also varies from low coastal plains to rough mountainous and heavily forested interiors. Overall, 41% of the country's land is considered to be cultivatable.

The climate changes from tropical in the north to sub-tropical in the south. The temperature, precipitation and humidity also vary. Temperatures range from a minimum of 16 to a maximum of 32 degrees Celsius. There are two distinct seasons: one wet (summer) and one dry (winter). During the wet season, winds from the north and east bring rain. The average rainfall in Vila is about 2,300 millimetres. The islands are also prone to cyclones during the summer, which is from November to April. During the Southern Hemisphere winter (May to October), the southern islands in the group can experience cool weather.

The indigenous people of Vanuatu are of Melanesian stock and call themselves Ni Vanuatu. As is characteristic of Melanesia, there is much diversity in the cultures and languages found in the group. In Vanuatu, 109 Melanesian languages are spoken, as well as English and French for education and Bislama, a dialect of Melanesian Pidgin English, as a lingua franca. Ni Vanuatu families live in villages that may range in size from one- to two-family settlements to those with up to 200 inhabitants. Socially and culturally, kinship ties are important and life revolves around the extended family with the bigman or chief as head of a village. Rural Vanuatu life is truly agrarian, with copra, kava, cocoa, coffee, beef and fish being main exports (Bolenga, 1995: 235–236).

Traditionally, the male child is more important than the female child in many local societies and receives preferential treatment. Thus, when resources are scarce, priority is given to the male children for education. Young female children are expected to assist in household duties by caring for younger siblings and to tend to subsistence farming until their teenage years (Bolenga, 1995: 236).

Vanuatu became a sovereign nation on July 30, 1980, having been once jointly ruled by France and Great Britain. Today the country is an interesting mix of the two previous colonial powers in almost all sectors of public life. This is especially evident in the education system and the languages chosen for education: English and French.

Vanuatu's biggest task upon independence was to reinforce among English- and French-educated Ni Vanuatu—aptly called Anglophones and Francophones—the idea of thinking of themselves as one people. Today, we can say there is some success to this, though there still exists the idea among Francophones that they are less advantaged than Anglophones in furthering their education and securing higher positions in the public or private sector (Virelala, 1995: 405).

Source: The Commonwealth of Learning, "Identifying Barriers Encountered by Women in the Use of Information & Communications Technologies (ICTs) for Open and Distance Learning in the South Pacific". 2001. Wellington, New Zealand.

With the legacy of the colonial education system, this meant that the country had to develop a new system that was truly for Ni Vanuatu, not one that was meant for the British or French student. Today the country can be proud that, for its primary and secondary levels, schools are now using a national curriculum, with major examinations sat at years 6 and 10. At the higher secondary level, students also sit the regional examination for the Pacific Secondary School Certificate. Much debate still exists surrounding the immediate importance of the New Zealand Bursary examinations in English secondary schools. In the French secondary schools, the Examin Supérieur D'entrée Universitaire is sat in year 14.

According to the 1999 national census report, of the total population of 186,678, almost 49% are females. The life expectancy for females is seventy, higher than that of males (sixty-seven years). Out of the total female population (90,996), almost 43% have gone through some kind of education from kindergarten to tertiary. Of this, 3.8% have attended junior secondary school, while only 0.6% have made it through to the senior secondary level and only 0.2% to the tertiary level (Table 1):

Table 1. Number of Males and Females in Secondary and Tertiary Education in Vanuatu^a in 2001

	Junior Secondary	Senior Secondary	Tertiary
Male	3,710 (51%)	648 (54%)	243 (57%)
Females	3,545 (49%)	555 (46%)	181 (43%)
Total	7,255	1,203	424

^a This includes Ni Vanuatu students studying in overseas tertiary institutions.

Of the females who enter a tertiary institution, 35% attend overseas tertiary institutions while the remainder attend the Vanuatu Teachers College (Bibi, 2000: 2).¹

Life today in Vanuatu is very much rural based, though the two urban centres of Port Vila and Luganville are a hub for commercial, political and educational activities as well as the link to the outside world. Urban drift and the related unemployment factor are local problems, as they are worldwide.

With the introduction and fast advance of modern technology globally, countries such as Vanuatu cannot be left behind. The computer age has brought with it information and communication technologies that the Vanuatu population cannot ignore. Today in the urban areas, the term "computer" is not new, and many have realised that as well as traditional literacy, computing literacy is also vastly important.

This paper focuses on the use of information and communication technologies for open and distance learning by women in Vanuatu.

¹ While the percentage of females in tertiary institutions appears to be a substantial number, this only reflects the large number of females enrolled in teaching at the Vanuatu Teachers College.

Impact of Information and Communication Technologies on Distance Learning

Currently in Vanuatu, the only institution providing open and distance learning is the University of the South Pacific (through its regional extension centres) and the School of Law, Emalus Campus, both based in Port Vila.

The University of the South Pacific is a regionally owned institution. The twelve Pacific nation members are: Cook Islands, Fiji Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Member countries make annual contributions based on the number of students enrolled through the university. Overseas aid from Australia and New Zealand also assist in the running of the institution (Lynch, 2001).

Through its extension centres and sub-centres in member countries, the University of the South Pacific enables students to enrol in courses at certificate, diploma, degree and (to some extent) post-graduate levels. The local extension centres also provide continuing education courses that try to meet the local demand for acquiring certain skills. In this section of the extension services, there are also regional continuing education courses that aid students in gaining entry into any of the extension courses or programmes available. An example is the Pacific Pre-School Certificate, which enables students to start the Diploma in Early Childhood programme.

In Vanuatu, basic education is still a luxury. The Ni Vanuatu child receives six years of primary education before a national examination is sat. Only a selected few enter one of the fifty-eight secondary schools. Four years in junior secondary school prepares the child for the annual Year 10 leaving examinations. From there, a further filtering of students takes place and only the successful can enter the senior cycle, sitting the New Zealand Bursary examinations which enable them to go for further studies through government- or overseas-funded scholarships. Students who are not successful in any of the secondary schools have a second chance to further themselves with the continuing education, preliminary and foundation programmes offered by the University of the South Pacific.

Primary education in government schools is free, with parental support through contributions and fundraising activities encouraged. This is not the case at the secondary level. A major problem faced by parents of children in secondary school is financing this education. The cost of fees and transportation are high and, in some cases, students drop out to ease the burden. The cost of further training is, of course, more and many parents struggle to repay loans in order to keep their children at one of the university's centres before they are given much sought-after scholarships.

Because of the traditional importance of the male child, today there are more males than females in the classrooms. What is needed most are awareness campaigns introducing women role models who can encourage young females to go beyond village commitments and obligations that have held back their mothers and grandmothers. Vanuatu's greatest needs, then, are to put more females in schools and to work on altering traditions against the girl child, making certain that gender equality is fully understood and embraced.

Due to the above constraints, the pool of well-trained human resources is small (though growing steadily) and seems to be concentrated in the urban areas. For Vanuatu, the pressing need is first to increase its well-trained men and women before other areas of concern can be addressed. Both young men and women are required for further training in all areas (formal and non-formal as well as traditional and non-traditional), though funding agencies stress the need for gender equity. As it is,

open and distance learning through the university's centres and sub-centres is a first in the country, but it is a method that is currently associated best with tertiary training. It will not only be expensive for rural dwellers, but also seems unnecessary, to those who might be able to afford it will be close to the good schools in the urban areas.

The information and communications technologies offered by the University of the South Pacific in Port Vila include audio and video conferencing, the Internet and e-mail services. All registered students, both extension and law students are encouraged to use these facilities. The Law School uses the Internet through its own Web site and e-mail to provide some courses to its students. Lecturers employ these facilities, as the university is instrumental in making use of all means possible in reaching out to the students (Farran, 2001). Locally, students enrolled in extension courses make use of these services to attend tutorials conducted in Vila or from Fiji (or from any of the other centres).

Other institutions offering information and communications technologies that might be applicable to open and distance learning are mainly non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private primary and secondary schools in and around Port Vila and Luganville, as well as the Vanuatu Teachers College. Most use the Internet for research purposes.

Enrolment through the University Extension Centre every semester is made up of about 65% males and 35% females, although this gender gap is narrowing very slowly as more and more females take up studies through this method (refer to Annex 1 and 2 for comparison). Of the 35% females doing courses through distance learning, fewer than half are usually successful in completing their programmes of study due to reasons of age, marital and parity status, health and nutrition, low educational level, occupation, ethnicity, area of residence, size of household, access to household amenities, household income and community issues including financial support (Bolenga 1995: 245–254). Through the extension centre, audio conferencing is used on a daily basis for various courses. This method, known as satellite tutorials, is used by 70% of students enrolled at the centre. The other 30% who do not use this service are not interested in attending, are unaware of the daily schedule of tutorials, or live in the outer islands. About 45% who use this service are females and attendance trends show that females attend tutorials more than males (Bolenga, 2001).

Widening Women's Access to Information and Communications Technologies for Education Purposes

At the Emalus Campus of the university, both female and male students have equal opportunities in attending satellite tutorials to access information through the Internet and use e-mail to communicate with their lecturers and tutors both locally and regionally. As an institution, the university greatly supports gender equity and thus supports all opportunities for students and teachers to further themselves. With the methods available, all lecturers are able to research up-to-date material as back-up to lecture notes. Internet usage training is part of the orientation for students and is even part of some courses.

For a regional institution such as the University of the South Pacific, information and communications technologies are seen as vital for open and distance learning. Not only are these technologies cost effective, but they are also considered to be appropriate for such an institution. For instance, in a situation where a married female student requires one more course to complete a programme offered only on the Fiji campus, attending a video conferencing class is much less expensive than having the student in Fiji away from her family. The same lecturer may be attending

to a class of sixty in Suva while the married female is also participating in a studio many thousands of miles away.

In Vanuatu, a third-world country where communication is poor and electricity is non-existent in the rural areas, information and communications technologies for the purpose of open and distance learning is seen as an extreme luxury. Basic means of communication such as telephones, tar-sealed roads, airports and shipping services are still greatly absent on most islands of the country. For Vanuatu, the question of addressing the basic means of communication must first be met before the expanded use of information and communications technologies can be looked into.

With the growing realisation of the usefulness of information and communications technologies and of computers as an indispensable tool in today's world, continuing education at the University Extension Centre are swamped with applications for computer courses by both genders. Courses offered include those on basic computer know-how, as well as introductions to the Internet and e-mail usage. However, with the limited availability of information and communications technologies services and lack of other institutions providing similar courses, the rural population is still disadvantaged. Although the University Extension Centre in Vanuatu has two sub-centres in the north and south of the country today, only e-mail is accessed, and then only by staff members for administrative purposes.

All forms of communication are expensive in Vanuatu. Thus, despite increasing awareness in the efficiency and power of these information and communications technologies, the rural woman will continue to be at a disadvantage. For her, the closest sub-centre of the university may be on the next island and telephone communications will be her best option. Moreover, the nearest telephone may be some miles away, and walking or paddling a canoe to reach it may take half a day. If she uses public transport, it will cost about US\$40 one way, money that she does not readily have. Thus, for open and distance learning and the use of information and communications technologies generally, rural Vanuatu may not yet be in a situation to fully utilise these options, and any intentions for outreach into these areas must acknowledge that conventional ways of learning will still be applicable. Literacy, for instance, must be taught using traditional methods as well as models (such as the Grassroots Model) that are culturally acceptable. Trainers in workshops conducted in some rural villages in Vanuatu in 1999 felt this model was successful (Ngwira, 1999).

Training and Capacity Building

Under the auspices of the Vanuatu National Council of Women, women's groups within the village or church level are very effective in disseminating new ideas and technology. With regard to information and communications technologies, however, the high cost of communication coupled with related challenges (for example, financing the maintenance of equipment and specially trained manpower) remains a problem. Girls and women both in the urban and rural areas may be taught the usefulness of these tools, but only when the costs of connection and availability of the tools are addressed will the task of encouraging their use for open and distance learning be more pressing.

For Vanuatu, the urgent task is to spread education out to the rural girl, to allow her to make choices as to what future she desires for herself. That, as mentioned briefly above, needs to be advertised through means such as women's radio programmes or newspaper pages, posters of successful women, and short videos. Qualified women through the Vanuatu Association for Women Graduates should assist in this as much as possible.

In theory, all working women are given the opportunity to further themselves, but in practice, sadly, this is not often the case. Training privileges are mostly given to enhance or upgrade a previously qualified employee's knowledge or qualification as stated by the Public Service Staff Manual (Public Service Commission, 1998). Most employers follow this general rule. Thus, in situations where office cleaners (and other very low-paid/daily-rated employees) desire to upgrade themselves educationally, they are disadvantaged at the outset.

However, for those women who are eligible for training, many try to make use of the opportunity by enhancing skills as well as qualifications through local institutions such as the University Extension Centre. Skills are mainly those involving the use and application of computer software ranging from word processing to MYOB and Web design. Women who desire to further themselves are most likely to engage in courses that are in line with the work they are currently doing. Interestingly, it is very rare for private companies or government departments to provide funding for a full programme locally (most opt for the funding of shorter courses and workshops). Thus, most women who do pursue further training in a particular field at the University Extension Centre fund themselves.

Very rarely are training workshops or courses gender specific. Through AusAID though, the Institut National de Technologie in Port Vila encourages young women to enrol in non-traditional courses for women such as carpentry and joinery, electronics and mechanics. Offered by AusAID are scholarships that specifically call for young females. These are well received as this is one way in which females can expand their horizons beyond domestication.

In terms of open and distance learning, the University of the South Pacific offers courses that are non-gender specific. Through scholarship sponsors such as AusAID and the New Zealand Overseas Development Assistance (NZODA), females are sponsored in non-traditional areas such as the sciences and technology. The table shown in Annex 1 indicates the percentage of enrolments by course and sex at the University Extension Centre during the period 1987–1990. As can be seen, no females were engaged in any science courses at all in that time. Annex 2 presents the enrolment percentages during Semester 1, 2001 and shows that a small percentage of females are now taking science courses. Today nearly twenty females are on scholarships in regional institutions taking science courses (Palmer, 2001; Stevens, 2001).

Locally, for information and communications technologies to be effective, the three chief concerns for women—affordability, accessibility and availability (as defined by the Platform for Action of the Fourth U.N. World Conference on Women)—need to be addressed. In order for information and communications technologies to satisfy education and training, access to them must be made available in schools and training institutions throughout the country. In most cases, only some schools in the urban areas can benefit from these technologies because of high maintenance costs. In order for information and communications technologies to assist in encouraging girls to enter technology- and science-related fields, the technologies need to be physically present in the schools and also be part of the school curricula. In order for information and communications technologies to support women in organising and mobilising for empowerment, women must have access to this technological source both in the urban and rural areas.

Women and Public Policy

The government of Vanuatu has, at present, no public policies related to information and communications technologies, and there is still much scope for telecommunications expansion in the country. However, since there is now awareness of the need for such policies, the national government will certainly put in force appropriate measures when the demand arises. Policies regarding open and distance learning are also non-existent and the use of information and communications technologies for that mode of learning have not been considered a priority.

Locally, telecommunications in the country are monopolised by Telecom Vanuatu Limited (TVL) in a franchise agreement with the government. Although the company's aim is to provide telecommunications throughout the country, TVL has not yet achieved this. It aims to install Internet services at a reduced cost or even free to primary and secondary schools in the urban areas. To date, it has done so for five schools. The telecommunications connections at the University Extension Centre are independent of TVL (Banga, 2001). Thus, although this monopoly exists, the government supports the proponents of open and distance learning using their own means in reaching out to their students.

Like other respondents to recent surveys, TVL is very much aware of the latest International Telecommunication Union resolutions on gender and development. The company tries to meet the people's needs and is a big sponsor in many local fundraisers.

Conclusion

In Vanuatu, telecommunications and other means of communication are very expensive. Although with the changing world, information and communications technologies can bring the rest of the global village to our fingertips, for rural women (and anyone else) to be able to fully utilise these services (not only in open and distance learning), there needs to be the supportive human resources, as well as the availability of the technology, for this to occur. At this time, using information and communications technologies remains unworkable for bringing better education to the rural areas to further women in non-feminine fields or to help women empower themselves. Instead, traditional means of education are still the way to go. A forecast of ten to fifteen years for rural women to be able to access this technology easily—provided the necessary basic means of telecommunications are met—would be close to reality.

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Annex 1. Percentage of Enrolments by Course and Sex at the University of the South Pacific Centre, Vanuatu, 1987-1990

Courses	Females	Males
Accounting	29	71
Admin St/Manage.	8	92
Biology		-
Chemistry		-
Economics	17	83
Education	34	66
Geography	26	74
Home Economics	75	25
History/Politics	23	77
Library Studies	89	11
Literature/Language	30	70
Mathematics	20	80
SE	34	66
Sociology	17	83
Physics	-	-
Technology	-	-
UU	11	89

Source: Bolenga, 1995: 244

Annex 2. Percentage of Students by Gender Enrolled in Extension Courses at the University of South Pacific Extension Centre, Vanuatu, in Semester 1, 2001

Course	Female	Male
Accounting	37	63
Agriculture	8	91
Biology	43	57
Chemistry	28	72
Computer Science	3	97
Economics	38	62
Education	57	43
Geography	35	65
History/Politics	49	51
Language/Literature	47	53
Law	33	67
Library	89	11
Management	67	33
Marine Science	50	50
Mathematics	26	74
Physics	6	94
Psychology	33	67
SE	60	40
Sociology	33	67
Technology	0	100
Tourism	100	0

Note: SE – Interdisciplinary Courses