



The University of Fiji

THE UNIVERSITY OF FIJI JDP SCHOOL OF LAW INNOVATES VIRTUAL PLACEMENTS FOR ITS LEGAL PRACTITIONER PROGRAMME.

The University of Fiji's Justice Devendra Pathik School of Law has embarked on an exciting new initiative to allow its law students to complete their professional placement module by virtual means with designated law firms and organisations in Fiji.

The School of Law's Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice (GDLP) programme is normally undertaken over a period of 6 months post LLB degree with the final month being a 'Placement Module' where students are placed in law firms and organisations in order to obtain practical hands-on experience so that they are work ready at the end of the Programme after being admitted to the Bar.

However, this year, with restrictions due to Covid-19 from April, the Acting Chairperson of the Board of Legal Education (BLE), the Solicitor General, informed law schools in Fiji that the professional practice placement requirement had been waived by the Board.

The Acting Vice Chancellor and Dean of the JDP School of Law of The University of Fiji Professor Shaista Shameem said that this decision by the BLE without any consultation with all the law schools was most unfortunate. "Had we been consulted, we would have advised BLE that there were alternatives to physical placement in law firms for this module. The University of Fiji was already learning and teaching in virtual real time modes from 2020 when the virus first arrived in the country. The University had reached the required number of credit points in virtual modes without compromising the learning standards of the Fiji Higher Education Commission", she said.

Professor Shameem said that the GDLP students' placement also been waived last year with adverse effects on law graduates seeking to gain an experience that would be useful to them as practitioners. The University had realised that this had not benefitted the legal fraternity and qualifications of their students. Had the Board of Legal Education consulted on placements the University of Fiji would have expressed a firm view.

Despite the BLE waiver, the School of Law has asked its partner law firms to assist with managing placements in a virtual mode. "We have been amazed and very grateful to many law firms and legal organisations for stepping up and happily agreeing to supervise our GDLP students in the virtual mode", Professor Shameem said.

She said she did not want the students of the JDP School of Law to waste their time during what would be the final month of their GDLP Programme. The offer by law firms and organisations meant that the students would be engaged with the practice of law albeit in virtual mode. "The virtual legal mode is fast becoming a common methodology; virtual court cases and hearings are held frequently by judges and tribunals the world over to ensure that justice is delivered speedily despite the pandemic and Fiji should be no exception" she said.

Professor Shameem said the University prided itself on being 'future ready' and there was no better example than virtual learning in legal practice despite the constraints the pandemic had placed on education internationally.

At the end of the Virtual Placement Module the University of Fiji law students who successfully passed under close supervision and guidance will be issued with a Certificate of Competence by the University, alongside their formal GDLP Certificates. This will make them attractive to employers.

The law firms which have offered to supervise the students in virtual placement mode are Shekinah Law and Marsh Law of Suva, Reddy Law of Lautoka, Stallion Attorneys in Sigatoka, Vama Law and Capital Legal. The Fiji Women in Maritime Association and the Fiji Council of Social Services are also supervising students in virtual placement. Each student and supervising partner will communicate entirely through Google Meet, Zoom, Viber, Messenger, Twitter, Emails or any other means of communication available to both parties. The engagement hours will be determined by the supervisor and closely monitored by the JDP School of Law.

The virtual placement module is undertaken under strict conditions for both the School of Law and the legal organisations. A list of competencies has been conveyed to the principals of the organisations and students will study under meticulous compliance rules.

GDLP Programme Coordinator Ms Koila Kabu said, "All our students are aware of their ethical obligation to maintain the confidentiality of any information they receive during the placement as with physical placement. We have no expectation of any remuneration or reward, beyond the unmatched experience of gaining first-hand knowledge and the personal thrill of working in an actual law firm or on legal issues".

"Our students are also required to conduct themselves with respect and dignity in compliance with the rules, regulations, and conventions of the organization they will be attached to." Ms Kabu said.

Ms Kabu said that the School of Law had structured the Virtual Programme to emphasize "earning by doing", and has been versatile enough to do this virtually.

"Digital literacy has been one of our strengths at the University where we aim to make our students future ready," she said. "The students are competent in engaging with senior law practitioners and organization heads, and the close proximity bridged between student and supervisor, will guarantee a rich and meaningful learning process for our students."

Most of the GDLP students have successfully gained placements. They are expected to be allocated tasks such as drafting legal documents, reviewing of policies and procedures, briefs of regulations or legislation on human rights, climate change and gender issues in law, research of contemporary legal issues and basic legal administrative tasks that contribute to organizational outcomes.

"This arrangement is the closest resemblance as possible to working in a legal environment through online platforms," said Ms Kabu, "and our online library services are efficient and reliable for access by our students to research materials. This is a plus, and is an innovation we are looking forward to with great excitement."

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