



# The University of Fiji

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## **Message from Professor Shaista Shameem, Vice Chancellor, The University of Fiji**

### **To the University Community**

Greetings.

The University of Fiji Council has appointed me as your Vice Chancellor and I am grateful for the confidence expressed by the Council in making that appointment. I will be working closely with the Council and Senate, as well as the Founders of the University, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, in the exercise of my functions as Vice Chancellor. The staff and students of the University are represented on both Senate and Council, hence my duties and responsibilities will involve the University Community as a whole.

I thought it appropriate to share with the University Community my perspectives on my work as your Vice Chancellor so that it is clear from the start the direction that I will be setting for the University. This direction is expressed more comprehensively in the new Strategic Plan 2022-2026 of the University and each member of the University Community will become aware of that direction in detail once the Strategic Plan is made available in January 2022.

Today, 10<sup>th</sup> December, is United Nations World Human Rights Day, celebrated every year on this date with a different theme. This year the theme is Equality. The term Equality includes non-discrimination and the right of every person to be treated with dignity and respect. As a human rights lawyer I have always fought for the right to equality of every person in Fiji and elsewhere. My appointment as Vice Chancellor allows me to ensure that the right to equality is respected, promoted and defended at The University of Fiji and that the University itself exemplifies and symbolizes equality as a fundamental aspect of the right to education.

It is well-known that education, and higher education in particular, has suffered grievously during the pandemic- a natural calamity that no one could have foreseen. Many rights are violated everyday due to Covid-19 and the right to equal education is no exception. During the lockdown periods The University of Fiji took the opportunity to reflect on the type of education we wanted to offer students of this generation and the next, and resolved to invoke and re-examine the continuing mission of the University to be the 'critic and conscience of society'. That mission allowed us to look critically at the education system in Fiji as a whole and to consider the kind of education we wanted to provide at The University of Fiji.

It is no secret that the education system in Fiji falls somewhat short of what is required of a nation state so far removed from its colonial past. Students who enter our University's lecture rooms after 14 years of schooling do not, at times, have the basic knowledge or qualities required of their age group. As a lecturer of law I have found many of my first year students to be deficient in creative and independent thinking, lacking in confidence, inadequate in expression and writing skills and, at the same time, unwilling to put in the work required to become an above average student and graduate. The 14 years or so that students spend in the public education system prior to university are marked by something close to mediocrity. It is easy to blame the teachers for this by stating that their training at universities is deficient but when the education system and philosophy is weak at its core, it is unfair to target the teachers with such criticism. The Education Commission Report of 2000 established a modern and

creative agenda for education in Fiji; it needs to be dusted off and reviewed for its utility and application in our current circumstances by another Commission. The University of Fiji recommends that this be done at the earliest opportunity.

Despite the educational vacuum that exists, and indeed because of it, The University of Fiji has decided to deliver on the philosophy of the last Commission on Education. Education is the most important attribute for the development of a nation state and requires more than annually issuing directives on national priorities which are then used as the basis for awarding scholarships tenable at universities. Furthermore, there is no obvious link between the Student Loan Scheme and national priorities so there is no reason why they should be linked since students have to repay their student loan debt- it is not free money.

Covid-19 has also shown us that national priorities are themselves fraught with difficulties when industries collapse and employment disappears, having serious effects on our students' morale and future. Issuing revised national priorities in a rush and flurry without proper reflection on Fijian educational philosophy, and indeed on what our society might look like post Covid-19, is like re-arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic- a presumption that the ship is unsinkable and that only moving the furniture around will save it. But our education ship will indeed sink unless timely and intelligent intervention is made now. Our responsibility at The University of Fiji is to ensure that our own higher education ship not only remains afloat but that in any storm it reaches the shore safely.

There are two strands to The University of Fiji's future education strategy. The first is to build an appropriate knowledge-based society with a Fijian flavour, and the second is to provide quality in the knowledge disseminated to the University Community- staff and students alike. In reference to the first strand, the 5 and 20-year National Development Plan of Fiji states at page 13 that Fiji is aspiring to be a 'knowledge-based society'. Yet there is no meaningful definition of the word 'knowledge' in the Plan- is it practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, alternative knowledge, traditional knowledge or school and university qualifications? The University of Fiji aims to fill the definitional gap by proposing that the intersecting metaphors of the 'Drua Voyage' (a journey) and the ancient Indian educational concept of 'gurukul' (holistic education) adopted by our Founders, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, as its educational philosophy will, in combination, provide the direction in higher education adopted by the University in these challenging times. Thus the University's proposed Strategic Plan 2022-2026 has as its core value the idea of a '**journey in holistic education**' as the benchmark for creating a knowledge-based society. This means that knowledge will be defined in the broadest terms and students and staff will be encouraged to pursue education for its non-conventional, even esoteric, and public good purposes as well as for employment. Only by this inclusive method will we be able to prepare our graduates and community for a truly Fijian knowledge-based society for our times.

The second strand, quality knowledge, will be exhibited in the quality assurance standards to be adopted by The University of Fiji from 2022. These will be established according to internationally accepted standards of intellectual excellence, for example in achievement of highest qualifications among academic staff, in research and publications, and in developing innovative and unique teaching techniques for both face to face and virtual classrooms. The University expects 80% of its academic staff to have PhD qualifications with a significant percentage on PhD track. The University of Fiji Press is also launched today with its first publication: '*Pandemic, the Wheel of Suffering, Higher Learning and its Discontents: A Manifesto for Reform*' by Professor Subramani. Available at the University's Enlightenment Bookshop, the *Manifesto*, by one of Fiji's eminent philosopher/writers, is a proclamation for

educational revolution, not just reform. The Press will continue to publish high level, thought-provoking and reflective articles, monographs and books throughout the year which will provide academic staff with a peer-reviewed outlet for their research. Innovative lecturing in simultaneous face to face and virtual classroom modes to make learning accessible and interesting for all students wherever they may be located will be honoured by teaching awards presented each year.

The philosophy of education has been mentioned a number of times in my message which brings me to the issue of the place of The University of Fiji in the regional body-politic. We are preparing to become the Think Tank of the Pacific in economics, security and defence, politics, social issues, geo-politics, the environment, and indeed in the entire gamut of matters of concern to our region. In this capacity the University will continue to host Roundtables to obtain community views on questions important to the region and the world. Our Public Lecture Series will also continue from 2022 with the University establishing itself on a firm footing through the lens of *magistorum et scholarium* - defined as a community of teachers and scholars joined together in a common educational endeavour.

Quality knowledge will be accompanied by quality administration and support. There will be no shortfalls in the administrative responsibilities of the management sections. Our experience shows that if the operational systems are not sound, the academic business of the University is unable to function with integrity. Therefore, all operational systems will undergo regular reviews in the same way as academic reviews are conducted- by self-evaluation as well as by an independent 'fit for purpose' overview. The funding of the University is based on quality performance at the two core levels - administration and academic. Both need to be working in harmony to provide a valuable educational product to our students.

The University Community will note that the bar is set very high; our standards are measured by setting examples, engaging in and monitoring our activities as well as by reporting on them including through feedback and evaluation criteria established per activity. Ultimately we are performance-based. We are also committed to international standards with a regional focus. Every member of our Community will be part of our broad-based educational journey with the goal of placing The University of Fiji on the list of high achievers internationally. We aim to be 'simply the best' and there is an expectation during my tenure as Vice Chancellor that the best in each of us will be emphasised for the benefit of all of us at The University of Fiji.

I wish you all the very best for 2022 and beyond.

**10<sup>th</sup> December 2021.**