



# The University of Fiji

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## OFFICE OF THE VICE CHANCELLOR

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*Opening Remarks for the University of Fiji and iTaukei Trust Fund Board Collaborative Workshop on Programme and Course Planning for the Centre of iTaukei Studies, Waterfront Hotel, Lautoka, 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> March 2022.*

**14<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

**Professor Shaista Shameem FRSA**

**Vice Chancellor**

**The University of Fiji**

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**The iTaukei Trust Fund Board, Programme Coordinator, Madam Bulou Unaisi Nawalowalo Manulevu**

**Principal Cultural Officer, Institute of Culture and Language, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Mr Simone Sevudredre**

**University of Fiji's Council Member and member of the Ba Provincial Council, Ratu Meli Tora**

**Professor Tupeni Baba, Dean of the School of Humanities and Arts, the University of Fiji**

**Acting Director, Centre for iTaukei Studies the University of Fiji, Mr Usaia Gaunavou**

**Colleagues of the iTaukei Trust Fund Board and the Centre for iTaukei Studies.**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

## **Ni Sa Yadra Vinaka**

I am honoured to have been invited to address the inaugural collaborative workshop organised jointly by the University of Fiji, through the Centre of iTaukei Studies, and the iTaukei Trust Fund Board. The workshop has been funded handsomely by the iTaukei Trust Fund Board and we appreciate that support in our spirit of partnership.

The University of Fiji and the iTaukei Trust Fund Board (TTFB) signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 17<sup>th</sup> December last year to collaborate on a number of projects of mutual interest and, in particular, to help support the development of the Culture and Arts Centre Project of the TTFB.

The Culture and Arts Centre Project will harness the University's Centre for iTaukei Studies mandate through integrated cultural and art programmes which are strategically linked to Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education and SDG Goal 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. This approach will strengthen iTaukei language and culture for academic study.

The 4-day workshop, which begins today, is the first of many collaborative engagements between our two institutions and sets us on a path to ensure not only that relevant Sustainable Development Goals are met but also that our individual responsibilities to the communities that we each serve are facilitated at the same time.

The subject matter of the workshop this week is discussion of our Centre's Short Course development. The University of Fiji's Short Course Programme is part of our Strategic Plan 2022-2026 focus. The Strategic Plan was launched last week and is now available on our website. Anyone who would like to be involved in the University's work over the next 5 years should study this Plan carefully as it launches a new direction for tertiary education at the University of Fiji.

At the heart of the Strategic Plan is a new philosophy- the *Drua Voyage* in combination with *Gurukul* education- we call it ‘**Our Journey towards Holistic Education**’. The *Drua Voyage* metaphor showcases all education as a ‘journey’, not an end in itself. *Gurukul*, as the Founders of the University, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji, have traditionally practised, is ‘holistic education’ or a rounded education incorporating development of the human person in all her or his qualities, talents, attitudes and perspectives. Together our *Drua* and *Gurukul* focus will develop the kind of graduates that the Fijian nation, and indeed the world, desperately needs right now.

The University, from henceforth, will deliver equally **both** formal qualifications and life-skills in the entire curriculum. Learning and Teaching in our Strategic Plan thus incorporates Community Engagement, as well as Environment and Social Responsibility. All our course outlines are now being revised to include human values and social and environmental perspectives with the Sustainable Development Goals being assigned as our core value.

Therefore, the collaboration between the University of Fiji and the iTaukei Trust Fund Board is exactly on point as far as our next 5-year Strategic Plan is concerned. All our short courses are for community engagement as well as environmental and social responsibilities of the University communities we serve. Partnering with our TTFB colleagues on specific short courses as we work towards assisting with the development of the Culture and Arts Centre Project is part of our community wellbeing agenda.

I am delighted to note the short course topics that will be discussed broadly in this workshop are: Expressive, Performance and Fine Arts, Language, especially Language Survival and Continuance, Marine and Environmental Concerns and Methodology of Learning and Teaching that the programme also lends itself to. May I ask the workshop participants to please pay special attention to this last topic, Methodology of Learning and Teaching- the University emphasizes

‘student-centred’ learning in its 5-year Strategic Plan, also known technically as ‘heutagogy’ which means that the teacher learns as much from the students as vice versa. Knowledge creation, as we know, is not based on a linear or binary model of learning. Transfer of knowledge is a dialectic and since we are discussing the development of short courses at this workshop we need to pay careful attention to the community aspect of educational engagement. The University’s short course programme falls into our Strategic Plan category of ‘Continuing Community Education’ which focuses on the interdisciplinary approach to environment concerns, the economic future of Fiji and advocacy for the public good. For us attaining knowledge and public good advocacy are two sides of the same coin.

In this regard all Schools, Centres and Institutes of the University will lead by example in adult and community education. This is part of our national responsibility for developing a ‘knowledge- based society’ with knowledge very broadly defined as our **cultural capital**- a concept that we, the people of Fiji, are very familiar with. We know that the short-term focus on **skills-based** education is very often far removed from and irrelevant to what we consider to be education that is **knowledge-based**. It is the collaboration between knowledge and skills that the University of Fiji will strengthen through its Strategic Plan 2022-2026. This workshop is the start of our *Drua Journey* towards a holistic new tertiary educational philosophy in Fiji and, jointly, the University of Fiji and the iTaukei Trust Fund Board will provide the navigation plans for it.

That brings me to the second part of my address to you all this morning, and that is tertiary education funding. Recent discussions between the Higher Educational Institutions of Fiji (HEIs) and the Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Service (TSLS) executives has shown that there will be limited support for Year 13 sponsorship from 2022 due to a policy change. TSLS support to students for entering tertiary institutions will be affected by a quota system administered by TSLS, a raised

entry level mark requirement, as well as specific student awards tenable at only one of the tertiary institutions in Fiji.

Accordingly, the University of Fiji's ability to provide education to many year 13 students has, therefore, become limited by the policy and we have calculated that this means a drop of at least 15% in the income that The University of Fiji would have otherwise received through normal TSLS sponsorship as in years past. Most of the University's income is derived from either TSLS sponsorship or government grant; the grant in 2021 was F\$2.34 million.

The University recognizes that, as a result of the TSLS policy, many Year 13 graduates who would have wanted to attend the University of Fiji will not now be able to do so solely due to lack of access because of the entry level marks, which in the difficult Covid-19 economic downturn would have been hard to achieve anyway, and the quotas which, despite having the necessary entry marks, many students may not be able to make for whatever reason. One of the given reasons for the quotas is there is an 'oversupply' in certain careers.

The University of Fiji certainly hopes that the entire national priorities policy will be re-assessed by all the leaders of the nation, and by the Fijian Community as a whole, because the current national priorities focus may not conform with the aim to create the knowledge-based society promoted in Fiji's National Development Plan as part of its educational sub-plan.

The educational bureaucracy in Fiji needs to consult widely so that an ad hoc approach to national priorities for funding can be avoided and, in turn, to avoid the spectre of large numbers of young people left to fend for themselves with a limited future because they have not been able to access higher education from 2022 due to the TSLS quota system and new entry level mark requirements.

In recognition of this harsh reality, the University of Fiji's community has come

to the rescue in a small way with some scholarship schemes for Year 13 students. Effective from this year, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji (APS) is offering a full tuition scholarship to the top science student from the DAV Girls College to undertake the Bachelor of Medical Health Sciences Programme tenable at The University of Fiji. This Scholarship is known as Jasoda Devi Sharma-DAV Girls Scholarship and was made possible by the donor – the Estate of Jasoda Devi Sharma of Toorak. The late Mrs Sharma was an advocate of girls' education and her legacy will live on in the scholarship. Her Estate has provided a corpus fund of \$300,000.00 for this purpose with the capital to be invested and interest used to support the scholarship.

Another full tuition scholarship, and this will be appreciated by the participants at this Workshop who recognize the value of keeping cultures and languages alive, is to be awarded by the Sabha, our Founders, for the top Hindi scholar within its six secondary colleges to attend the University's Vernacular Language Programme. This award is known as the Shri Lekh Ram Memorial Hindi Scholarship. Funding for this award has come from the rental income of property donated to the Sabha by the late Mr Lekh Ram of Moli Place, Laucala Beach Estate.

A third award, of \$10,000 for Hindi Studies, was generously provided earlier this year by the family of Pundit Bhuwan Dutt in honour of their mother, the late Mrs Malti Dutt.

All these generous private donations are very much appreciated by the University as they allow us to provide tuition sponsorships to students who may otherwise miss out altogether in tertiary education.

By way of its Strategic Plan 2022-2026 the University of Fiji has launched an innovative initiative for students from the current 2022 Year 13 cohort in all Fijian secondary schools. The University will support qualified year 13 students

to enroll in introductory credit-based courses. We are making available this opportunity for the top, well-rounded, Year 13 students, based on their Year 12 internal, external and extra-curricula assessments, to undertake up to TWO University first year courses simultaneously with their Year 13 studies. Successful completion of the introductory courses will mean that these courses will be credited towards the students' University qualifications next year when they start University in earnest, leaving them time and space to pursue other University interests in their first year and enjoy University Life with less pressure.

This initiative, the first in Fiji, is called the **UniFijiStart Programme**. The University will meet the selected students' tuition fees for a maximum of two first year courses which will be undertaken **alongside** the students' Year 13 study. It will be offered to students who, as advised by their teachers and principals and supported by their parents and schools, have the academic and intellectual capacity and maturity to undertake, and succeed in, an introductory degree programme of their choice at the University of Fiji.

This support will allow capable students to jump-start their University study in advance. The selection of capable Year 13 students will be made by the University upon application by the student, accompanied by a reference from the relevant high school and supported by his or her parents or guardian, and after an interview with the student, teacher and parents or guardian. The **UniFijiStart** initiative was approved by the University of Fiji Council at its last meeting and details will be advertised in the media this week.

Community support for education in Fiji is not new. Indeed, from the very beginning, due to shortcomings, and even prejudice, in the colonial educational landscape when it was thought that people from the colonies were generally to be educated only to provide physical or low-level skills labour, the communities of Fiji have filled the gap and ensured that their young people have a future through acquiring broad education of all kinds and for all career paths. The difference

between knowledge and skills, and the necessary links between them was, and continues to be, very well understood by all our communities in Fiji.

In that light I urge all communities in Fiji to provide scholarships and tuition support to their young people who are our future. In particular, given the framework of this workshop this week, I urge all Provincial Councils in Fiji to consider providing tertiary education support for their young people, many of whom have been badly affected by a series of disasters in Fiji, both natural and unnatural, over the past few years. As the Year 13s consider their marks, to be released this week by the Ministry of Education, and think about what their future might hold for them, given these results, it is incumbent for Provincial, and indeed all Community Councils, to ensure that their young people, the future generation, do not drift off aimlessly into wastefulness for want of higher educational opportunities and funding. In the way that all communities had built schools in the past and took responsibility for educating their people themselves without waiting for anyone else to do it, it is time for the same communities to consider that strategy seriously again as we have no other option until a robust and inclusive knowledge-based educational philosophy and policy is determined by Fijian society.

I wish all participants the very best for the workshop which from today is an opportunity for 21<sup>st</sup> century enlightenment and presents a catalyst for change in the Fijian educational landscape.

I look forward to the results of your deliberations in the public interest.

Vinaka vakalevu.