



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, HERITAGE AND ARTS

INAUGURAL HIGHER EDUCATION FORUM 2022

**HON. PREMILA KUMAR, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION,
HERITAGE AND ARTS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**Wednesday 13 July 2022 @ 9.00a.m.
Sofitel, Denarau, Nadi**

- Deputy Chief Executive of New Zealand Qualifications Authority, Ms Eve McMahon;
- Commission Chair Mr. Winston Thompson and board members
- DFAT and MFAT Representatives, the joint sponsors of the Forum
- Dr. Libing Wang, Chief Educational Innovation and Skills Development, UNESCO,
- Executives from the Higher Education Sector,
- Keynote speakers from Monash University;
- Director of Fiji Higher Education Commission – Dr. Rohit Kishore;
- Private Sector Representatives;

- Senior Government Officials,
- Members of the media, ladies and gentlemen.

Bula Vinaka, and a very good morning to you all.

1. I am indeed honoured to join you all this morning at this Forum.
2. Let me first congratulate the Fiji Higher Education Commission for organizing this inaugural forum. It is pleasing to see that this Forum provides an opportunity for strategic deliberations amongst higher education stakeholders to align quality higher education qualifications with labour market needs.
3. It has become clear that educational attainment is not only vital to the economic well-being of individuals but also for the nation. We all know that access to and completion of education is a key determinant in the accumulation of human capital and economic growth.

4. The purpose of higher education qualifications is to develop new knowledge, identify skills gaps, and adjust workforce development demand to the economy which includes demand for new skills.

5. Ladies and Gentlemen, we have seen the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector. It has forced the world to talk about transformation of Higher Education and I think this is the right time to do so. Fiji is no exception to the critical need for developing new capabilities and integrating into the new normal as the higher education sector restructures to meet the demands of the employer.

6. Ladies and Gentlemen, it is crucial that we develop and embrace advanced technological capabilities to ensure that Fiji is future-ready to deal with the challenges posed by pandemics, climate change, geo-political tensions or other human and natural disasters.

7. We have to make the Higher Education sector fit for purpose. It must be relevant for entrepreneurs, for employers, and for the economic growth and nation development. Education transformation should serve the needs of labour market and entrepreneurs where knowledge is becoming an important economic resource for ‘knowledge-based’ economies.
8. As stakeholders, you are expected to brainstorm ideas on how to better match higher education qualifications to the demands of employers and discuss strategies to upskill and reskill workers to meet new job skills. There is a critical need for higher education institutions to develop programmes within the framework of the “next-generation learning standard”, which is becoming the norm around the world.
9. The new graduates must develop high order skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking abilities, and work skills that maximize employability, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

10. Ladies and gentlemen through this Forum, FHEC intends to develop 2023-2027 Strategic Plan. The panel discussion on key strategic pillars of the proposed Strategic Plan, such as Responsiveness, Relevance, Resilience, Sustainability and Engagement will redefine the work of higher education which must align to the new trends.

11. At the global level, this year in September, the UN Secretary General will host a summit on Transformation of Education which will be attended by our leaders.

12. It is realised that unlike other sectors, the education sector has not seen any significant transformation in low and middle income countries. I think this Forum is timely to discuss transformation in Higher Education Sector.

13. As a sector, we must prepare ourselves for this disruptive transformation. At the heart of this transformation will sit the ICT ecosystem. This means that in order to build resilience in the education sector, we need to provide students with the learning that they are most familiar with.

14. One which is ICT enabled learning, and perhaps most important is the use of appropriate pedagogies for learning.

15. However, there is a lot of skepticism about online learning. Online learning is not only about offering courses online, rather finding the right fit, how the physical and virtual modes can be blended to enhance student experience inside and outside classroom, combined with industry knowledge. Teaching through Zoom and placing materials on Moodle platform is not enough.

16. Given the financial constraints and the rising cost of living, parents and students are worried whether their degrees will give them jobs and still offer a “good return on investment”? As such you need to think beyond just the classroom instructions and develop curriculums that will assist students to find jobs or create entrepreneur opportunities.

17. Higher education institutions must also think about financial sustainability and rethink how to best utilize their physical space by incorporating technology into it. With the transition to hybrid learning, Institutions may also explore divesting from any of their assets that are deemed non-critical. To succeed in today's economic and educational environment, innovative thinking is required to maximise the utility of all physical assets. It involves asking difficult questions for example, what might be the new HR structure in a technology driven self-learning environment?

18. Globally, higher education institutions face the challenge of producing leaders for the future. There is a leadership gap in existing graduates. This is not only observed in Fiji and the pacific island countries but also in other countries around the world. There is an absence of critical thinkers and problem-solvers, and a lack of strategic thinkers and entrepreneurship in our graduates.

19. All these are inhibiting the generation of new ideas and innovation. This will impact our productivity and hence our ability to achieve sustainable growth and development. As higher education institutions you must explore ways of addressing the existing leadership gap and adequately develop leadership qualities in our young generation.

20. Ladies and gentlemen, the industries today are fast evolving and their requirements of labour force is changing. It is therefore critical that HEIs work closely with industry partners to address the needs of the industry through relevant programmes.

21. You may be aware that as an employer my Ministry has raised a number of concerns about the appropriateness of the teacher training programmes.

22. We would like to see that the HEC ensures that the teacher training programmes are accredited or benchmarked to some global accreditation institution.

23. As we expect doctors, lawyers, engineers, IT professional programmes to be accredited, I do not see why teacher training programmes should be any different. International accreditation means that the professionals in this sector have the qualities that are required for the profession. I urge the HEC to look seriously into this. Local registration is clearly not enough. If we want our children to receive quality education, this is imperative.

24. Ladies and gentlemen, following the two waves of Covid-19 pandemic Government's revenue has been greatly affected. For a small nation such setbacks have impacts of much larger magnitude. While our boarders have opened and we are seeing our tourism industry thrive again, the fact remains that in these uncertain times we simply cannot rely on the tourism industry alone to keep the economy going.

25. The Government is relying on the business sector to build and drive the country's economy. Due to downturn of the economy with job losses, the nation needs to quickly create more opportunities for employment as well as appropriate skills set and professionals. This is where HEIs and FHEC can play an important role.
26. Post-pandemic, the TVET sector has become critical for our country to create jobs and grow the economy. The training must be focused in areas of need to create employability and provide support to the industries. It must provide people with the appropriate skills, experience and competencies to effectively contribute to the sector. Then only we will truly see the growth in the economy.
27. We look towards the HEC's leadership in developing this subsector.

28. We also need to carry out workforce needs analysis to establish, with evidence, the areas of skills shortage and areas of oversupply. Unless this is done Government's expenditure on tertiary education will not be targeted and we will not get the returns we want from our investment.

29. I therefore urge you to carry out a workforce needs analysis. This will also help TSLS in determining their priority areas for funding.

30. I hope that you will hold frank discussions with the industries, higher education institutions and external parties who are part of this forum so you can come up with concrete plans for a way forward for higher education in Fiji. I would be keen to see the outcomes of this forum.

31. Before concluding my remarks, I want to make some additional remarks on matters that are equally important to the HEIs. One issue that comes up frequently in the media is the very sensitive topic of Bullying and Sexual Harassment in the Universities.

32. We cannot take such matters lightly. Such matters should be fully investigated and our students as well staff must be assured of protection from such incidences. I understand that HEIs have policy on Bullying and Sexual Harassment but whether it is working or not or applied independently.
33. Since the major tertiary institutions are part of this Forum, I would request if FHEC can find some time to have discussions on how this could be handled in most professional and transparent way. Perhaps our experts from Australia (Monash, DFAT and MFAT) can shed some light how this is handled in Australia and whether our policies and its implementations can be strengthened to protect our students and staff members.
34. The FHEC should also ensure that our HEIs recruit high quality professionals both in the academic and professional fields.

35. Ladies and gentlemen, once again I thank FHEC Management and the Board for this timely Forum. I wish you well in your deliberations. I now have great pleasure to officially open this forum.

36. Thank you, vinaka vakalevu, dhanyabaad.