

**SPEECH BY
THE HONOURABLE JOSAI VOREQE BAINIMARAMA, PRIME MINISTER OF FIJI AT
THE USP OPEN DAY ON FRIDAY 27 JULY 2018**

- Honourable Ministers,
- The Pro Chancellor and Chair of the USP Council,
- The Vice Chancellor and President of the USP,
- Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
- USP management and staff,
- Students, families and friends,

Bula Vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I'm delighted to be able to speak directly to so many young Fijians here today, especially those prospective students who are getting their first glimpse into what could very well be the next stage of their education here at the University of the South Pacific.

I'm always quite keen to make the time to be with you all here at Open Day. I have very fond memories from being here back in 2016, where I met many young Fijians who are now students at this institution. So, I am very glad to be here this morning with all of you, especially in a year that USP celebrates 50 years of educating Fijians and citizens throughout the Pacific.

Some of you may know, we're hosting our Climate Action Pacific Partnership Conference in Suva at the moment, and I'll be headed back there after my remarks today. That Conference is a pillar of our Presidency of the global climate change negotiations, or COP23.

Leaders from around the Pacific are here to take part in a "Pacific Talanoa", our regional contribution to the global Talanoa Dialogue that was launched as part of our COP23 Presidency. I know that means a great deal here at USP, as that same spirit of Pacific cooperation forms the very core of your institution's own educational mission. We in Fiji introduced the Pacific-wide concept of talanoa on the global stage as a new way to drive the implementation of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. And through the inclusive, participatory and transparent style of talanoa exchange, we're bringing together governments, businesses, investors, civil society and ordinary citizens to call for even greater ambition from every nation on earth -- ambition we need if we are to spare our planet from the worst effects of our changing climate.

The basis of that entire effort, and for Fiji's global leadership on this issue, is my belief that we owe it to young Fijians, like yourselves, to secure a future where all of you can receive a high quality education, enjoy your lives, work and raise families of your own in safety, with the confidence that the progress you make won't be wiped away by the cyclones, the rising seas and the heavy rains - climate impacts the experts tell us will become even worse in the years ahead.

I greatly appreciate the support that I've received during my time as COP23 President from Fijians across the country, particularly from young Fijians, who are among the most vocal and passionate climate warriors on the planet. That is critical, because this fight won't be won in a generation.

We're working hard to put the world on track to meet key targets years and decades from now that are critical to our secure future. And as future leaders on this issue, it will be your responsibility to keep our planet on that path. I have every confidence, that working alongside global citizens of your own generation, those critical targets will be met and those will be your victories to celebrate.

It makes me proud to know I'm among future leaders and climate champions, as it makes me proud to see all of the opportunities that are at your feet here in Fiji today. It's the realisation of a dream for me personally, and a result of the visionary agenda we've carried out to revolutionise all levels of education in the country, putting more Fijian students into the classroom than at any point in our history.

I know that Fijians of my generation share that same pride I feel now, as all across Fiji, our children and grandchildren are seeing success that was once unimaginable. And we certainly also share a belief in your potential. You are our future professionals. You are also the job-makers of the future. Fijian entrepreneurs who will define the next Fijian century of innovation. Fijians who will take up jobs in new industries that have never before been to our shores. Fijians who will lead our nation and, indeed, lead the world, as we are now looked to as champions on many of the great challenges facing our planet.

Fiji has entered a golden age in education and opportunity in your lifetimes. You've watched that happen, you've witnessed our transformation into the economic hub of the Pacific and into a global leader and advocate. You were part of the first generation of students to fill Fijian classrooms under our free education initiative. The first to benefit from subsidised transportation to and from school.

You have access to technology and an IT network that would have seemed impossible only a decade ago.

We built on all that progress in a very big way through our most recent national budget. And I'm sure many of you here today were closely following this year's Budget announcement, along with the debates that followed. I say this not only because you're young and educated, but because you had a vested personal interest in what this Budget contained.

For the first time in Fiji's history, over one billion dollars has been dedicated to the education sector for 2018-2019. This is the single biggest allocation of any Government initiative, and the first time any sector in Fiji has received a billion-dollar allocation. That is a reflection of my long-standing belief that education is the most vital investment that any leader can make -- not only in his or her people, but for the very future of the country they serve.

We have significantly increased the number of National Toppers Scholarships that are provided by Government, with an additional 340 full time scholarships-- bringing the total from 630 up to 970. And in line with our commitment to ensuring inclusivity of students with special needs, Government is also offering 20 full time dedicated scholarships under the Scholarship Scheme for Students with Special Needs.

Government has also dramatically increased funding in the Tertiary Education Loans Scheme, or TELS, budget by 30 per cent, to cater for the growing number of TELS students who want to take advantage of the TELS programme. We have also doubled the parental income eligibility threshold, ensuring that many more students have access to Government funding.

The Budget also included good news for students when it comes to repaying their TELS, as it introduced an innovative new financial programme: Accelerated Repayment Incentives. These incentives will take the form of major discounts for students who repay their loans quickly under TELS, giving you the opportunity to save 10, 25, or even 50 per cent off of the principal amount of your loan. As graduates put money back into the system more quickly, TELS will have the funds freed up to continue to grow and offer opportunities to more Fijians. This change will immediately make TELS more self-sustaining-- a way we are supporting the next wave of young Fijians, and another example of the prudent and responsible economic management of my Government.

As you enter this next stage of your education, it's my expectation that you will take advantage of all the opportunity that has been placed at your feet. I expect you'll work hard, that you will build on that progress we've already made, that you will go on to find jobs and create jobs in our growing economy, and that you will continue Fiji's unprecedented momentum forward. In that mission you cannot falter, and you cannot afford to repeat any of the past mistakes made in our nation's history.

I've heard it said before that you can't know where you're going, unless you know where you've been. That means we need to know our history, all of it, the good along with the bad, if we are to walk forward into a brighter future. So I encourage all of you to read our history, and to speak with the generations who have come before you. Take a moment to talk to your parents, your aunties and uncles, and your grandparents. Ask them about the Fiji of yesterday -- what life was like when they were teenagers. What the Fijian economy was like. How the supermarkets were different. What kind of jobs were available. What educational opportunities were at their feet. I can assure you, their Fiji was a vastly different place.

They can also tell you of some of the ugliest parts of our nation's history. Those traumatic periods we endured before any of you were born. You didn't experience the political upheavals that ripped apart the fabric of our nation in 1987, and the years of backwards divisive leadership that followed. You didn't know the many thousands of Fijians who fled the country, those who lost faith that they could ever be accepted or be successful here in Fiji. You never knew the suffering of that time, and I assure you, so long as we remain united and keep Fiji on the path of progress, you never will. Because that is not the Fiji of today. Today, we are a united country, all of you - no matter who you are, no matter where you come from - are Fijians. We all share the

same destiny. We all share the same love for our country and for one another, and we all share the same care and concern for the future direction of our nation.

But make no mistake, the voices of hatred and division that once did such untold damage to our nation are not gone. We've pushed them to the fringes of society, but they still persist. I'm sure you may have seen that kind of divisive and damaging thinking on social media, with people attacking those of different ethnicities and those of different religions. Unfortunately, we are even seeing those kinds of attacks being made by political leaders today in this country. It's completely unacceptable -- it's not something we can ever tolerate as a society. And as young Fijians, as the next generation, it is you who must finally shut the door for good on any and all attempts to divide our society along ethnic, religious or communal lines.

We only beat back those old forces when the vast majority of Fijians came together and finally said: enough is enough. It was only through the will of the Fijian people, the will of your parents, your grandparents and even your great grandparents, that we emerged as a united nation, after all those lost years. And it was their will -- the will of ordinary Fijians, everywhere -- that gave my Government our mandate to unite the country, to bring sound management to our economy, and to give all of you the unprecedented level of opportunity you now have at your disposal.

Today, after nine years of growing the Fijian economy, after bringing unemployment to a 20-year low, after putting more talented young people like yourselves through primary and secondary school and on to post-secondary education. It's clear that a united Fiji and a stable Fiji, is a strong Fiji. We finally have a clear national direction, that is delivering real improvements in the lives of our people, especially for young Fijians like yourselves.

For just about all of you, this next election will be the first time you can vote. It's incredibly important that you do. Your vote is the single greatest tool you wield in determining your future. You should inform yourself, you should listen to those seeking your support, and you should make your decision based on who you believe can best take the nation forward and promise a stronger, stable and even more prosperous future. We must be focused on the future, not politics of the past.

Higher educational institutions, including USP, are hubs of exchange, ideas and new ways of thinking. And that is a fundamental part of our democratic system. Here, I'm sure you'll find more than a few people who have no problem disagreeing with some of my Government's decisions. That's okay. That's what a healthy democracy is all about.

USP was the first regional university in the Pacific and we recognise the impact this institution has had on the Pacific over the last 50 years. And we hope this will continue for the next 50 years.

I realise I've spoken a great deal about the responsibilities you all hold, and the great expectations we hold for your future. But it's very important that you find the time to enjoy yourselves while you're here. This stage of life isn't all about homework, lectures and exams. It's also about building connections with your fellow Fijians. It's

about sometimes getting out of the classroom, and living your lives, playing sports, taking part in extracurricular activities, and discovering who you are and the Fijian citizen you want to become.

I'm with all of you in that journey, and I wish you every success.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.