

PRIME MINISTER HON. MANASSEH DAMUKANA SOQAVARE MP
SPEECH ON THE OCCASION OF THE GROUND-BREAKING CEREMONY FOR NEW USP
SOLOMON ISLANDS CAMPUS, HONIARA, THURSDAY 24TH AUGUST 2017

The President of the Asia Development Bank (ADB), Mr. Takehiko Nakao
Minister for Education and Human Resources Development, Hon. John Dean Kuku MP
Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development,
Dr. Franco Rodie
Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of the South Pacific, Professor Rajesh
Chandra
Director of USP Solomon Islands Campus, Dr. Patricia Rodie and your good staff
Officials and Invited Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon.

On behalf of the Government and People of Solomon Islands, it gives me enormous pleasure to join you in this afternoon's ground-breaking ceremony. As we all know, the ground-breaking ceremony is to inaugurate the proposed new USP Solomon Islands Campus. This Campus is purposely designed to increase access to quality university education to citizens of our country – particularly young Solomon Islanders – who will become the future leaders of this nation. In that regard, I am especially delighted with the supportive role my government, including past Solomon Islands governments and officials, have played in facilitating the process of the development of the new USP Solomon Islands Campus.

To that end, USP – our regional university – has grown considerably since its inauguration in 1968. Today USP has established a solid foundation and has created successfully a learning ambience conducive to the whole-person development of students from all over the Pacific Island countries and abroad. The excellent track record of its graduates in both employment, and communities, especially here at home in the Pacific Islands countries, speaks well of USP's remarkable progress over the past years.

In that regard, this ground-breaking event is especially important for the present and future Governments and people of Solomon Islands, as it represents a 'Win'. A 'Win' with respect to key initiatives undertaken by both USP and the Solomon Islands Government in order for our country and people to grab the opportunities to access quality university education, and winning the future through investments in education.

Solomon Islands as a country and nation have bright, energetic, forward-thinking young people who both deserve and want to complete their education at the highest level possible. As a Government and national leader, it is our responsibility therefore to provide these young people with the very best educational opportunities. Educational opportunities that will also help create and generate economic opportunities, both for their own and personal fulfilment, as well as for the social and economic future of the country as whole. This is a major aim of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, and a fundamental goal of the National Education Action Plan. The National Education Action Plan 2016-2020, for instance, sets out to achieve full completion of

quality and relevant basic education (that is, Primary and Junior Secondary schools) for all children in Solomon Islands; whereas tertiary education will be taken care of by the forthcoming new education legislation.

In terms of basic education, by 2016, and for the first time in this country, almost all our children who were enrolled in primary school continued their schooling into Year 7 which is junior secondary school. Furthermore, Students' participation rates in school are close to acceptable in the primary level. However, in contrast to this pleasing development, Students' participation rates from Year 9 onwards and into tertiary are quite unsatisfactory. This unsatisfactory situation is due mainly to insufficient places in the secondary schools. After Year 7 participation rates drop alarmingly. The current level of students enrolled in basic education - Grade 1 to Year 9 - who then go on to senior secondary school and then tertiary, is far too low. This is an area Government through the Ministry of Education is focusing more on to address sooner rather than later.

The Ministry of Education is currently actively seeking to redress the lack of senior secondary school places for our young people. We are investigating where there are too few secondary school placements, and improving the infrastructure in these schools, and the additional teachers required. This is so young people can take their place in senior secondary classes and continue education to the end of secondary schooling. Following on from there, we also need more tertiary openings for our young people both at local universities and in regional training colleges.

Broadly speaking, whilst secondary education sets out to introduce, entice and broaden young peoples' interests and minds for new knowledge; relevant and appropriate skills are equally necessary. Therefore, our Education Strategic Plan 2016-2030, sets out to ensure that secondary education delivers both work related and transferable skills including entrepreneurial and ICT skills in order to increase the number of youths with relevant competencies for employment, finding decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

In other words, in terms of tertiary education, we aim to consolidate the establishment of a comprehensive, integrated system of Tertiary Education which provides quality education and relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

As such, tertiary level education and training is responsible for meeting the needs of industry and business through the provision of graduates who are able to meet labour market demands. In this connection, it is critically important for the government through the ministry of education, to have close and effective communication and collaboration with the various stakeholders in business and industry.

At the beginning of this year 2017, our National Parliament passed the Solomon Islands Tertiary Education and Skills Authority (SITESA) Bill, which has now become law. SITESA is the Ministry of Education's plan of action to reform the tertiary education sector to create a high performing national Tertiary Skills sector that is responsible for providing graduates who are in demand by our local, regional and international labour markets. This is just the beginning but it is already a promising start.

Moving on; for Solomon Islands today, the number of students obtaining a tertiary education in universities outside the country is far too high. This has especially high cost

implications for the government and country as whole. Therefore, an additional USP Solomon Islands Campus is an essential addition to the tertiary sector of the country. This also means that our students can be educated as well as participate in tertiary life locally rather than having to travel overseas. It does not mean that everyone stops going abroad for tertiary education. What I mean to say is that our people doing tertiary education locally or in-country means that they are more likely to stay and contribute to Solomon Islands after they graduate. In other words, retaining our locally trained graduates is essential for the future participation of educated Solomon Islanders in our growing country and economy.

By way of contextualising the issue of tertiary education a little further, 45% of our population is made up of people aged between 16 and 25. Industry needs to work with recently passed Solomon Islands Tertiary Education and Skills Act to create economic opportunities for our young people once they complete their education. Work opportunities need to be created for our young educated people to participate effectively in the Solomon Islands economy and society.

In this regard, the number of recorded Rural Training Centres (RTC) in the period 2013 to 2016 increased from 28 to 54. The number of trainees increased by 27% in total with an increase of 37% more female trainees by 2016. In 2016, 76% of students were in the 20-29 age group. In 2015 and 2016 there were no students older than 44 years old enrolled. However, we still need to do more to improve the RTCs. They are well-established in our provinces but are crying out to be up-graded, for proper resourcing in order to provide relevant post-Year-10 to Year 12 education and training for young people who wish to pursue trades and have businesses of their own. As a country we need to encourage this at the local provincial level.

As a Government, we recognise that line ministries and government agencies need to work together to connect education, with the Ministries of Labour and Industry, and Agriculture and Livestock. In this way a collective approach to building our education and economy can take place.

Local Universities and Research

A quick word on local universities and research. Universities as is their remit need to find out about our communities – to do research, for example, into why students drop out of school, and how we can entice them back into schools with the belief that education is personally fulfilling and is the best way to ensure they can get a better and brighter future by way of future employment. Having said that I am also mindful that through right and appropriate policies, Government must also ensure there are jobs awaiting graduates after completing their tertiary education. In that sense, universities too can assist the Government in researching potential future economic and job opportunities that are entrepreneurially and technologically driven.

The Future for Our Young People

On today's occasion, we can also pose in a very broad and general way some immediate concerns and pressing issues facing young people in Solomon Islands. Thinking aloud, some questions that come immediately to mind include; what are the current Solomon

Islands' work practices that will no longer be available to our young people and which must be replaced for relevant future work?

How do we guide our young people and provide the right education for them and for the Solomon Islands as a whole?

What future do they see for themselves?

How do they think the Solomon Islands should develop?

It is almost a cliché that the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow. For Solomon Islands, therefore, our young people need guidance and support to help them shape their future. Most of all, they need education of the highest standard and to the highest level possible to achieve this.

The future belongs to them and it is our responsibility to help them achieve a brighter future.

Finally, on this memorable occasion, on behalf of the Government and people of Solomon Islands, may I thank the Asia Development Bank through the President, Mr. Takehiko Nakao for his welcome presence with us today, and most particularly for ADB's critical assistance in providing the necessary finances in the form of a loan of US\$15.9 Million to facilitate and establish this important project in Solomon Islands. Let me assure you Mr. President that this assistance is noted heartily by the Government and people of Solomon Islands; indeed the South Pacific region as a whole since this Campus is part of the region's premier university. And that it is our sincere hope that this wonderful and kind gesture is only the beginning of many more future engagements and collaborations in the education sector in Solomon Islands and USP as a regional university.

In closing, let me also extend appreciation to all those who have worked tirelessly to help organise today's ground-breaking ceremony including Professor Rajesh Chandra, Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of the South Pacific. If the success of today's ground-breaking ceremony is anything to go by then I am confident and looking forward to the eventual completion of the new USP Solomon Islands Campus. It goes without saying both staff and students too are undoubtedly earnestly looking forward to enjoying the facilities and equipment in the new campus when it is all completed.

Once again, thank you everyone for your presence on this special occasion and a very good afternoon to you all!

Thank You.