

**SPEECH BY THE
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PRIME MINISTER OF FIJI AND MINISTER FOR ITAUKEI AFFAIRS AND SUGAR
INDUSTRY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC'S OPEN DAY, 2016**

- 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.

Today is a powerful reminder of the importance of our education revolution in empowering our young people. And giving Fiji and the region the knowledge base on which to build a more prosperous, inclusive future.

As I look out over this gathering and especially at the faces of our prospective students, I feel a great sense of excitement about what lies ahead. And I'm delighted to have accepted your invitation to speak at the University of the South Pacific's Open Day 2016.

This is the day on which the University showcases what it has to offer prospective students and invites them to join more than 29,000 other Pacific Islanders currently enrolled in its programs.

They come from the 12 nations that support the USP – not just Fiji but the Cook Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Students: Wherever you come from, you are destined to contribute not only to the knowledge base of your own countries but to boost the collective knowledge base of the Pacific Islands and improve our international standing.

Of course, Fiji has its own national university – the FNU – plus the University of Fiji. But we are also proud to have hosted, since 1968, the main campus of one of only two regional universities in the world. And to have been its biggest contributor.

The USP is an important symbol of our regional leadership and our commitment, through education, to improving the lives of every Pacific Islander. And I want to use this occasion to re-dedicate ourselves to that role. And to continue to help strengthen the USP, expand its programs, and cement its position at the centre of regional life, as well as in the intellectual life of our own nation.

As I keep saying, my Government's proudest achievement has been to extend the benefits of education to every Fijian young person, and especially access to higher learning. Our free education and our scholarships and tertiary loans have transformed the prospects of even the most disadvantaged young person. As announced in the 2016-2017 Budget, thirty more scholarships will be available under the National Toppers Scholarship Scheme to ensure that six-hundred and thirty of the best and brightest students in our country are able to access tertiary education in selected priority areas, under the Government's scholarship scheme. This is our investment in the human capital of our country.

But it is not just the top students who are given access to education, the Government's Tertiary Education Loans Scheme or "TELS" provides no interest, or very low interest loans to students who want to further their education, but who may not be able to afford the fees. Through this initiative, the Government is giving all Fijians access to tertiary education.

We have also set up thirteen new technical colleges throughout Fiji to offer short term trade courses to address the skills shortage and contribute to our economic development. Our technical colleges and universities – including USP – are valued partners with Government in providing Fijian young people with a level of access to higher learning that is unprecedented in our history.

I want to primarily direct my comments today to all of our young people who are here to see what the USP has to offer. As I've said in my message in the supplement that you have all received outlining the various course options: I hope that your imaginations will be fired by what is possible if you work hard to fulfill your dreams. Not only to get a formal qualification to pursue your chosen career but also how you can use that knowledge to help make the world a better place.

For any Fijian, there is more opportunity now than at any time in our history. With the Government's assistance, you have been given a better chance of getting a tertiary education than any previous generation. And I urge you to think about not only what this means for you personally, but how you can use this education for the greater good – to contribute personally to building our beloved Fiji.

I am convinced more than ever that greatness is within our reach. We are finally united and are putting the lost years behind us – the years we squandered arguing about who deserved more of the national cake. Rather than working together to grow that cake so that everyone gets a bigger slice.

Now, the national cake is getting bigger every year. We are currently enjoying the longest running period of economic growth in our history. Seven straight years of expansion. All the indicators are pointing upwards. But history tells us that we must not be complacent. Each and every one of us needs to make a personal commitment to work together – as one nation, one people – if we are to fulfill our destiny.

That means standing up more than ever for ethnic and religious understanding – the cornerstones of any successful nation. It means standing up for the principle of taking every Fijian with us on our journey forward and leaving no-one behind. And it means

drowning out the voices of division with a chorus of unity and goodwill. Of care and of love for each other and especially the most vulnerable – our women, children, the elderly and the disabled.

In this context, I want to say something about the increasing misuse of social media by some people to cause division and upset. And especially the targeted abuse of innocent people on ethnic or religious grounds, which we are seeing far too much of in Fiji at the present time.

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter can be a powerful force for good, in keeping people connected and for the exchange of information and ideas. That is how I would encourage you all to use it – as a means of bringing people together. But unfortunately, there are some individuals and groups roaming cyberspace who are trying to stir up hatred against their fellow Fijians on ethnic or religious grounds.

I ask you all to do what you can to expose such people. To confront their messages of hate and their threats of violence. Some of these trolls and cyber thugs either act anonymously or steal other people's identities by setting up false accounts. So we need everyone who uses social media to be alert to these individuals and do what you can to shame them.

Let me be quite clear about this. It is not a question of threatening free speech. Political criticism is perfectly acceptable and, indeed, is an important part of our democracy. And we encourage it. But inciting hatred against someone because of their ethnicity or their religion is a crime under Fijian law and the laws of many other countries, including our bigger neighbours. And it cannot be justified nor should it be allowed.

We are mercifully free in Fiji of the racial and religious violence that plagues certain other countries and we are determined to keep it that way. And that means coming down hard on those who incite the kind of hatred that can easily lead to violence if it is not contained - a breakdown of law and order that we have seen in Fiji before but will never tolerate again.

I wanted to say all this here today not only to an audience of young people who are the main users of social media in Fiji but to make an important point. That freedom of expression is a vital component of any democracy and is, in fact, guaranteed in our Constitution. But it is not an absolute right. With freedom comes responsibility – a responsibility to keep our society cohesive and protect the rights of every citizen.

To all our prospective students: you are being given the opportunity to study at a university that for 48 years, has served the Pacific with distinction and is increasingly seen as the region's think tank. Fifteen of its programmes so far have received international accreditation - the stamp of global approval. The USP is at the cutting edge of a range of research areas of vital importance to the Pacific such as climate change, renewable energy and green growth economies. So for any person, to be educated here is a privilege.

As I've said in the supplement you've been given: Be passionate about the learning process but also enjoy university life – the sports and other activities. Exchange ideas. Debate the great issues of our time. How we can move our nations forward. Confront the

challenges of development. Of climate change. How we can preserve our environment and improve the living standards of our people. How we can get the voice of the Pacific to be heard more forcefully in the world.

All this is possible here. So as you embark on the next stage of your education and what I hope will be a lifetime of learning, I wish you every success in whatever course of study you choose.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.