

**WELCOME ADDRESS BY THE
VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT, PROFESSOR RAJESH CHANDRA
AT THE OPENING OF THE DISABILITY RESOURCE CENTRE COMMON ROOM, 2017**

1. Welcome and Acknowledgements

- The Chief Guest, Mr. Joshko Wakaniyasi – President of the Fiji Disabled Persons Federation;
- Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Learning, Teaching and Student Services, Professor Richard Coll and members of our Senior Management Team;
- Invited Dignitaries and Guests;
- Manager and staff of the Disability Resources Centre;
- Members of the University staff and Students;
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

On behalf of the University community, I am very pleased to welcome you all to this significant event—the opening of our Disability Resources Centre Common Room. I extend a very special welcome to our Chief Guest, Mr. Joshko Wakaniyasi. Vinaka Vakalevu for agreeing to officiate at this important function.

2. The University's current Strategic Plan 2013 – 2018 has highlighted the improvement of student services and inclusiveness as major outcomes. The establishment of the Disability Resource Centre in 2013 was one of the SP initiatives and was designed to support students with disabilities who wish to study at the University. Going beyond this initiative, the University also developed its Disability Inclusiveness Policy to guide the implementation of disability-friendly services as well as the provision of reasonable teaching and learning facilities and environment.

3. The journey to be more inclusive and provide disability-friendly facilities and environment has not been easy, but I think that we have managed to achieve quite a lot. In 2013 the Disability Resource Centre office was established with a separate computer lab that is outfitted with 7 computers, 3 of which have JAWS, a world class screen reader for students with visual challenges. Five single rooms have been allocated to on-campus students with disabilities in A block, 2 of which are wheelchair accessible and 1 married quarters flat at Catalina Drive which is also wheelchair accessible. The upgrading of the physical environment has been progressive to include lifts and ramps where needed. The current planned renovation to the University library will also be disability friendly. 2017 has seen the launching of the first ever Regional Disability Scholarship and the completion of the Disability Resources Centre Common room which we are here to officially open today.

4. I am pleased to say that since the establishment of the DRC in 2013, a total of 96 students have had access to our services and 17 have graduated of which 11 are currently employed, 4 are continuing with their studies and 2 have returned to their home countries.

5. I am very proud to see how our Engineering School has taken on the mission of inclusive development and focused its research and development on assisting persons with disabilities. One of the two patents obtained by the University is in support of blind people—the electronic eye cane. The School has also developed a braille-slate device that it manufactures itself and which has now been provided free of charge to some of our member countries.

6. This indicates that our support for inclusiveness and especially support for persons with disabilities is very much embedded into the thinking of the University and our staff.

7. We are also the first University in the region to establish a Disability Resource Centre in the tertiary sector and provide such relevant services to persons with disabilities. We look forward to strengthening our network with partners such as donor agencies, businesses, scholarship providers and disabled persons organizations to ensure that persons with disabilities are not left behind.

8. I would like to acknowledge our stakeholders such as donor agencies, scholarship providers and Disabled Persons Organizations for assisting us in our journey to be more inclusive and provide for the success of persons with disabilities. I wish to especially mention very strong support received from the Government of Australia through DFAT, and the assistance of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and of course from the Fiji Disabled Persons Federation.

9. A very warm welcome once again.

Vinaka Vakalevu, Dhanyavard, Thank you and God Bless