

Creating a culture of Teaching Excellence at Fiji National University



(From left) College Teaching Excellence Award recipient Dr Hirdesh Sachan of CAFF, Raymond Keshwan of CMNHS, PVC L&T Professor James Pounder, Dr Ravita Prasad of CEST, Dr Rohit Kishore of CBHTS and Bhagwanji Bhindi of CHE.

I believe that excellent teaching changes lives. How many of us have been influenced by a great teacher whether it be at school, college, or university. In my own career as a teacher, more than once, in conversation with an ex-student of mine, the student has related back to me a comment I made in class which has resonated with him or her and seemingly has had an enduring influence. Now I don't claim to be anything special but when I receive such comments from former students it makes me realise two things. First, good teachers choose their words carefully. In fact, this is a principle one can find in the Bible when we read Proverbs 18:21 which informs us that: "The tongue has the power of life and death".

In a teaching context, this means that the teacher should look to speak words of encouragement to students not words of condemnation. The second thing I have realized is that teachers are viewed by their students as role models. In a volatile and uncertain world which has been made even more uncertain with the advent of the Coronavirus pandemic, young people more than ever need role models that display the ethical behaviour that is grounded on sound moral values.

It is in this context that we are celebrating the recipients of the FNU teaching excellence awards. These are the teachers that are modelling the way for their students and have a way of communicating that encourages them to realise their academic potential. Aside from their character and communication skills, the recipients here today are just plain good teachers who are constantly looking to hone their skills and techniques.

It is my plan to hold these teaching excellence award celebrations on a biennial basis for the purpose of forming a cohort of teaching excellence award and certificate of merit recipients who will form a mentoring team for faculty new to FNU or existing faculty who need help with their teaching.

The Teaching Excellence Awards Scheme also confirms the University's commitment to:

- developing a culture of teaching excellence among academic staff;
- acknowledging the importance of quality teaching for student success;
- improving the student learning experiences;
- acknowledging innovative and creative teaching whether it be face-to-face, blended or fully online; and
- promoting the scholarship of teaching.

Eligible candidates should be full-time teaching staff who have been teaching at FNU for at least two years.

Award recipients are decided by the Selection Panel comprising of student representatives and senior academics such as College Associate Deans and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Learning and Teaching after receiving the nominations.

The panel follows strict criteria to choose the winners.

The Awards

1. There will be six awards in a year – one for each of the five College and one for the award of the overall FNU Teacher of the Year
2. The College Teaching Excellence Award (TEA) recipient will receive a cash reward of \$5,000. The FNU Teacher of the Year recipient will receive an additional cash reward of \$5,000.
3. Individual recipients will also be given a certificate and a plaque.

Professor James Pounder
Pro-Vice-Chancellor Learning and Teaching
Fiji National University

Addressing the Present but Planning the Next: Transitioning with Technology-based Education into the New Normal Conditions

“Teaching is one Profession that Creates all other Professions.”

Winning the inaugural FNU teaching excellence award was indeed a great honour for me. I have been involved in higher education learning and teaching for over twenty-five years with the single aim of producing life-long learning graduates. Lifelong learning is a self-motivated, voluntary and ongoing pursuit of knowledge creation, both for personal and professional gains. Together with enhancing competitiveness and employability, it also improves personal development, self-sustainability, social inclusion and active citizenship. We not only produce passive job seekers but also develop entrepreneurial skills in our graduates who create employment opportunities for themselves.

Over the years, I have developed and used several teaching strategies and pedagogies to produce cognitive thinkers and ongoing learners. Two of my favourite teaching strategies include exemplary teaching and modelling. The former is based on the constructivism teaching theory developed by John Dewey (1998). Using this approach, I allow my students to construct new knowledge based on the foundation of their previous learning. Allowing students to dwell upon their prior knowledge provides coherence in their learning, eliminates any knowledge gap, and thus they are easily able to construct new knowledge in their minds following the cognitive learning process. As an exemplary educator, I always attempt to connect students learning to the economic and social affairs of their lives and empower them to do real work that matters to their wellbeing, their parents, families and the social and business community around them.

Teaching by the modelling technique allows me to engage student learning through an observation process whereby students use preconceived and well-developed models of the learning process provided to them. Modelling is about showing and applying. Firstly, I take my students through the models provided to them and make them fully understand the models. Then I allow them to apply the learning from the model in a suitable context. For example, I use visual, mathematical, empirical and simulation models in teaching economics. These models are theoretical constructs representing economic processes by a set of variables and a set of logical and or quantitative relationships between them. Models are designed to illustrate complex processes. They are enablers that help students to see what outcomes could or should look like. It allows students to engage and succeed in their learning. Also, it reduces student workload and confusion because common misconceptions are addressed as or before they arise.

However, with the world entering into an unprecedented new normal condition post-Covid-19 crisis, a **paradigm shift** is required in our learning and teaching pedagogies. New normal mimics the crisis condition in the aftermath of the crisis as normal conditions. Therefore, our teaching strategy should accommodate the unprecedented experiences of lockdowns, teaching remotely, risk to human health, social distancing, closure of schools and universities, financial difficulties of parents and more such extraordinary conditions of human life amidst the crisis. To address these difficulties faced by the students, distance teaching seems to be a more favourable option to full-time campus-based face-to-face teaching only option. A flexible blended mode of delivery between face-to-face and distance teaching is perhaps the most appropriate fit.

While the availability of advanced technology makes online learning and teaching much easier than before, it has its challenges that teaching faculties must come to grips with. It requires a well-thought-out strategy on how to **move learning and teaching from physical space** to virtual space with the aid of technology. It requires rethinking how to transit face-to-face teaching pedagogies into technology-based teaching pedagogies. It needs to address the fast-changing economic and social behaviour of our 21st century societies, plus the challenges faced by our students, teachers and parents in the new normal conditions of post Covid-19.

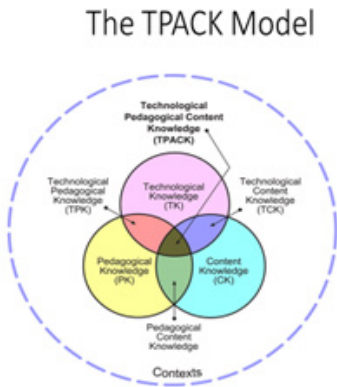
Educators cannot anymore only be the content knowledge specialist teaching in a physical space classroom. Rather s/he is required to prepare a comprehensive online remote teaching curriculum in a TPACK framework. TPACK is a framework that combines pedagogical practice in a technologically enhanced learning environment. Mishra and Koehler (2006) developed TPACK using Lee Shulman's (2004) pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) framework. The teaching curriculum prepared within the TPACK framework, encapsulates the content knowledge (CK), pedagogical knowledge (PK), and technology knowledge (TK), and becomes comprehensive technology-based teaching by distance mode curriculum.

Through the implementation of the TPACK curriculum, the whole experience of face-to-face teaching can be transferred from physical space to virtual space through digital technology with both the content knowledge and teaching pedagogy remaining in tacked. The three levels of knowledge combined into



Dr Rohit Kishore with his award.

one comprehensive learning package will make students learning experience an enjoyable journey as opposed to dull and boring. The model is depicted below.



Source: Mishra, P., & Koehler, M. J. (2006). *Technological pedagogical content knowledge: A framework for integrating technology in teachers' knowledge. Teachers College Record, 108 (6), 1017–1054.*

The TPACK model can easily include online tools such as discussion boards, student emails, real-time events discussion through videoconferencing or web conferencing, etc. Students' learning can be self-paced with a varying focus of instruction and enabling teachers to do more with fewer resources. Multiple communication platforms like viber, whatsapp, zoom, skye, twitter, facebook, instagram and others can be used to create dynamic communication between the educators and students. Mobile apps and other such apps can be integrated within the TPACK system for student grading and feedback purposes.

Last year the Acting Vice-Chancellor, Professor James Pounder, under his leadership launched the Teaching Excellence Award system at FNU. The vision is to improve the quality of teaching in an integrated approach. It is to provide our lecturers with the necessary skills in utilising high-impact pedagogical strategies to improve student learning. Lecturers are guided to undertake ongoing research and draw upon their research findings, develop new and industry-relevant teaching material, and disseminate practical knowledge to students that can be used in solving the ongoing critical issues and problems in their disciplines.

As the inaugural recipient of the teaching excellence award, I am working on developing exemplary teaching curriculums within the TPACK model for three business programs which we intend to launch soon. These programs will only be taught by distance mode, addressing the possible issues likely to be faced by our students, parents, teachers and the university community in the new normal conditions. The technology-based virtual teaching space is growing fast with more and better student empowering learning strategies becoming available. I have taken the lead in utilising all these advanced digital tools in developing new learning and teaching curriculum within the TPACK framework.

The aim is multiple folds. It addresses the issues of the new normal conditions, allows our lecturers to undertake teaching-related research and keep the knowledge base relevant to the fast-changing global circumstances. Also, to develop both hard and soft skills in our students, for example, critical thinking, problem solving, lifelong learning, having entrepreneurial skills and behaving etiquettely. In addition, it develops the new era teaching skills in our lecturers that are required in understanding and educating our future generation students, for example, generation Y, Z and generation new normal.

Last but not least, all the above said and done no doubt addresses the issues of current and future circumstances and will improve teaching quality in the new normal conditions ahead of us. However, nothing can replace the educators (teachers, lecturers and others) own volition, eagerness, determination and motivation in continuously upgrading their knowledge and applying that knowledge with striving determination in educating their students. Student learning is enhanced when the rate of change in knowledge development (complexity) is matched with the rate of change in students' learning ability. Lecturers should steer students toward a productive trajectory, provide a conducive learning environment, consistently give feedback to students and foster a culture of learning. If an educator adopts and adheres to the strategies and approaches discussed above, s/he will achieve excellence in teaching and their students in learning. If not, they both will fail.

Dr Rohit Kishore
Acting Dean
College of Business, Hospitality and Tourism Studies

Dr Rohit Kishore received the CBHTS Teaching Excellence Award and the FNU Teacher of the Year award.

Bhindi recognised as an outstanding academic

An educator, author and a lover of music and art, Bhagwanji Bhindi, is a firm believer that education is a lifelong investment which opens doors to opportunities and possibilities. This, he says, lays a solid foundation for students to achieve anything they set their minds to.

Bhindi, who is a lecturer at FNU's School of Communication, Language and Literature at the College of Humanities and Education (CHE) recently won the University's Teaching Excellence Award, an acknowledgement for his contribution in the academic field.

One of the philosophies of Bhindi is connecting with students and encouraging them to excel in life, both academically and as an individual. The soft-spoken academic believes everyone has the potential of becoming a great leader and encourages the younger generation to follow the footsteps of their mentors.

It is this aspiration, which helped the Fiji National University's (FNU) senior academic become an outstanding educator in his discipline.

"This is a significant step to encourage and motivate educators to excel and compete in the learning and teaching process. I feel honoured and delighted to have received this award which means a lot to me," said Bhindi.

Education and Career

Bhindi was born in Vunimoli, a village about 20 kilometres from Labasa town. He attained his primary education at Vunimoli Islamia Primary School before joining All Saints' School for his secondary education and later joined Labasa Sangam (SKM) College.

He obtained Bachelor of Arts (Honors) in English Language and Literature and Master of Arts in English Language and Literature from the University of Poona in India, now known as Savitribai Phule Pune University.

The senior academic has also graduated from the University of the South Pacific with a Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching, Post Graduate Certificate in Education, Diploma in Educational Evaluation and Diploma in Educational Administration.

Before joining the Fiji National University, Bhindi had served as a Teacher, Head of Languages, Vice-Principal and Principal of various secondary schools in Fiji including Mahatma Gandhi Memorial High School. He has also served as a Vice-Principal at his alma mater, the Labasa Sangam (SKM) College.

"All these years, as an administrator, I kept my passion for learning and teaching buoyant," he mentioned.



Bhagwanji Bhindi with his award.

He was awarded Member of the Order of Fiji [General Division] by the President of the Republic of Fiji on 25th November 2014 for the contributions in the field of teaching and education.

FNU experience

Bhindi joined FNU's College of Humanities and Education in 2010 and has had a pleasing experience and abundance of memories to cherish since then.

"I strongly believe that to foster learning, the teacher needs to be enthusiastic about the materials and the content being studied. I see my role as a coach for the class and point out the positives about each student's work in a sincere way while also giving constructive criticism of their work," he mentioned.

"I believe that all students are unique and must have a stimulating educational environment where they can grow physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and spiritually. I desire to create this type of atmosphere where students can meet full potential."

Although absenteeism of students from classes towards the second part of the semester has been a challenge for the Language Lecturer; he was able to overcome this through academic counselling.

"I also divide students into smaller groups and appoint leaders in each group. Leaders become the point of contact between the students and me. This has greatly assisted me during my teaching and tutorial classes," he added.

'New normal' teaching method

In light of the new normal teaching practises, Bhindi highlighted the need for academics to be more adaptive, flexible and accommodative towards the students.

"An efficient and effective teacher will be able to equip students with knowledge, skills and values which can help students to tackle challenges of life with equanimity."

Bhindi's mantra to becoming a successful academic

- Being a keen listener to students' queries and questions.
- Being sympathetic, empathetic and friendly attitude to students to create a closer bond.
- Being knowledgeable in the subject area.
- Being flexible, but firm.
- Adapting to different situations and attending to the needs of students.
- Having the attitude to keep learning, even as a teacher.

Crop Science expert scoops award

Seeing his students flourish in their respective fields brings a brimming pride of smile for Fiji National University's (FNU) senior academic Dr Hirdesh Sachan, who believes the best impact he can make on someone's life is through education. It is the same satisfaction that has empowered the senior educator to keep inspiring the future generation.

Dr Sachan, the Head of Department Crop Science at FNU's College of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (CAFF) was recently recognised by the University for his excellent teaching practice through the Teaching Excellence Award.

"I am overwhelmed to have received this award. This is a great initiative by FNU to inspire our staff. When we recognise excellence in teaching, we are doing much more than motivating teachers to reach a certain standard because this is also a way of inspiring others with recognition of what it takes to achieve excellence," he mentioned.

Dr Sachan currently heads a department which deals with teaching, learning and research in agronomy, horticulture and plant breeding and genetics.

"I believe in a learner-centred teaching process, where I facilitate learning. I involve students with discussion and collaborative assignments," mentioned Dr Sachan.

"I mix individual and group projects, so students have opportunities to explore topics on their own, allowing them to think critically about these topics, and also to work with other students."

"This philosophy and my teaching style of positive, kind and supportive relationship with students and an effective discipline plan and orderly classroom appear to work well," he added.

Dr Sachan hails from India and completed his Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Agronomy from Govind Ballabh Pant University of Agriculture and Technology in Uttarakhand India in 2006.



Dr Hirdesh Sachan with his award.

"I qualified in the National Eligibility Test for university teaching twice. I have more than 12 years of teaching and research experience in various aspects of Agronomy. I am interested in imparting knowledge in teaching and learning process for the community," he added.

With a love of travelling and a passion for imparting his knowledge across students in other countries, the enthusiastic educator travelled to Fiji six years ago.

Since joining FNU in 2014, Dr Sachan has actively worked on improving the crop science field at the University. His role has been instrumental in coordinating and development of CAFF's first Master of Agriculture programme.

"This is, in fact, a research-based programme designed to equip students with wider specialist professional knowledge in conceptual, scientific and technical competencies related to the candidate's background and area of interest. I am pleased to inform that there are various courses offered which include agronomy, agribusiness, agricultural engineering, agricultural extension, entomology, plant genetics and breeding, horticulture, plant pathology, soil science and animal production," he informed.

The CAFF staff said coming to Fiji was one of the best decisions he made, which profoundly played a huge role in his successful career.

"I served as the Head of the Department of Agriculture at CAFF from 2014 to 2015. Thereafter I was appointed as Acting Head, Department of Crop Production in April 2015. I have also served as Postgraduate coordinator for CAFF from 2018 and has also coordinated various other agriculture programmes."

Earlier in 2013, Dr Sachan, as an excellent staff for his College, received a similar award for his service and dedication as the Post Graduate Coordinator.

Dr Sachan aspires to become a successful academic in his specialised field of study.

Prasad rewarded for outstanding teaching performance



Dr Ravita Prasad with her award.

Sixteen years of passion, hard work and dedication to the teaching profession became extra special when Ravita Prasad, an academic at Fiji National University’s (FNU) College of Engineering, Science and Technology (CEST), was awarded the 2019 Teaching Excellence Award.

FNU has established the Teaching Excellence Awards Scheme (TEAS) to recognise and reward distinguished teachers at the University, who have demonstrated outstanding performance in teaching. One exceptional academic staff from each of the five Colleges was

chosen for the award together with an overall recipient of FNU Teacher of the Year award.

The award recipients receive a plaque, certificate and cash reward of \$5,000. The FNU Teacher of the Year receives an additional cash reward of \$5,000.

Prasad, a Physics Lecturer at CEST, acknowledged the award committee members for valuing her contribution to the College.

The 38-year-old said she feels honoured to be one of the recipients of this award.

The award serves as a motivation for Prasad’s career aspiration to attain a PhD and to continue assisting the future generations to realise their dreams.

“Teaching was something that I wanted to do since my high school days. I love guiding students and assisting them in realising their true potential,” said Prasad.

“While I am teaching, all I want is to do my best in delivering the particular subject and that students are interested in what is being taught as the greatest reward for an instructor/lecturer is to see their students excel in life.”

According to Prasad, it is imperative to introduce creative ideas to keep the students engaged and ensure effective communication is maintained amongst students together with the course lecturer, especially in current times, where a global pandemic has caused changes such as a transition to online learning and teaching of programmes.

“I have created Viber group chats for my units, which gives a platform to my students and me to communicate more easily and quickly.”

“We are video recording lectures and tutorials so that students can view them at their own time if they missed something during class or when they are absent.”

While speaking about being part of a College whose programmes and careers are perceived as male-dominated, Prasad said having understanding, encouraging and neutral supervisors made her work easier and more enjoyable.

“If you have the will to stand out from the crowd then no one has the power to stop you, and when such attitude is given a little encouragement, it blossoms into wonderful success stories, and I am grateful to have peers and superiors who have supported me immensely in my career.”

Prasad’s research interests are in the areas of renewable energy, long-term energy planning and energy demand forecasting.

A typical office day for Prasad in a nutshell: Arrive at work by 8 am, check and respond to emails and then prepare for classes. Conduct classes, mark assignments or lab reports. Have lunch with friends and pick kids from school. Carry out research work once teaching work is done. Before going home, prepare a to-do list for the next day.

Raymond puts his heart into teaching



Raymond Keshwan with his award.

Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned.” Titus 2: 7 – 8 English Standard Version Bible. This inspirational quote is the driving force behind Fiji National University’s (FNU) senior academic Raymond Keshwan’s prosperous career.

Keshwan, the Head of School of Health Sciences at the FNU’s College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS) was recently recognised with the Teaching Excellence Award for his contribution towards curriculum development and nurturing future students in the field of radiological sciences.

“Winning this award was a humbling experience as I feel that there are better teachers out there than me. I was fortunate to be nominated by our staff and students,” said Keshwan.

“I did not realise my contributions to student learning and teaching and staff mentoring until I read the comments of my peers and students in the nomination forms,” added the senior academic.

Having joined FNU’s CMNHS in 2009 as an Assistant Lecturer, he over the years gradually progressed up the ranks. Keshwan loves to be ‘hands-on’ so in between his administrative duties, he actively teaches courses in medical imaging. However, Keshwan’s forte is teaching medical radiation physics and its applications in modern medicine and biology.

“Seeing students demonstrating sound moral values, ethics and compassion in their clinical practice and growing academically, emotionally and socially are the most heartfelt and best moments of my life as an educator,” said Keshwan.

Originally from Labasa, Keshwan is the only Medical Radiation Physicist in the Western Pacific. He is the Director of the Center of Education for the World Federation of Ultrasound in Medicine and Biology in Fiji and the Editorial Board of the International Atomic Energy Agency Advanced Medical Physics Learning Platform.

Keshwan has also been the former Vice President of the Fiji Society of Medical Imaging Technologists and Fiji’s representative to the International Society of Radiographers and Radiological Technologists.

The road to success has not been an easy one, however, Keshwan said turning challenges into opportunities has been the key. He attributes divine guidance, family support, consistent hard work and having a clear vision of goals as the driving factor to his colourful career.

One of the proud achievements of Keshwan has been the transformation of medical imaging from traditional methods to modern learning.

“This included a major review of the medical imaging curriculum for improving the structure of the programme, the courses and its delivery, teaching, assessments and learning methodologies,” he shared.

“We have been able to integrate technology in our clinical environment allowing us to supervise students as well remotely. The inclusion of e-portfolios in assessments, reflective exercises and transitioning to a flipped classroom is also transforming the traditional approach to learning and teaching to support a more constructivist approach.”

An avid advocate of continuous professional development, Keshwan said engaging the disengaged learner and getting them to embrace change, has been one of the major life challenges as an academic.

“I strive to keep updated with educational research, development and policy. This helps me to implement new pedagogical methods in learning and teaching to meet different learner needs.”

“Earning the respect of students and colleagues requires a consistent character. Consistency of character equals consistency in respect for me and my leadership.”

With his deep desire to empower his students, Keshwan said the teacher’s expectation from students need to be equalled with what teachers give to them.

“Teachers are mentors and this is the quality that I most aspire and feel is what has earned me this award. A good teacher teaches beyond the content.”

“Creating an environment with pastoral care that is both nurturing and supportive earns students respect over time.”

These characteristics came out strongly when I was nominated for this award.”