



INSIDE FNU

SPEDI Launched to Transform Agricultural Innovation into Community Impact



Fiji National University Vice- Chancellor Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, Chief Guest Na Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, FNU Council and SLT with invited guest and participants of the conference. Photo Credit : Penioni Kolinisau

WHAT'S INSIDE:

PAGE 3

- ACIAR Reaffirms Longstanding Partnership with Fiji at International Landcare Conference

PAGE 4

- FNU Conference Strengthens Regional Collaboration for Sustainable Agriculture.

PAGE 5

- Ram Aspires to Become an Industrial Arts Educator
- Uluivalili College Principal Commends FNU
- Waqalevu Aims to Become First Medical Professional in Her Family

PAGE 6

- Building Hospitality Industry without Barriers.
- Creating Safe Space Start with Conversation.
- Fiji Airports CEO calls for businesses to embrace purpose alongside profit

PAGE 7

- FNU Empowers Students to Champion
- Kiribati Student Inspired to Advocate for Inclusion
- GEDSI Workshop Inspires Future Inclusive Leaders

PAGE 8

- From Village Kitchen to Pacific Food Systems: How FNU Lecturer Asaeli Naika is Shaping Healthier Futures

SPEDI Launched to Transform Agricultural Innovation into Community Impact

BY WATI TALEBULA

The launch of the South Pacific Extension and Development Institute (SPEDI) at the 2026 Fiji International Landcare and Sustainable Agriculture Conference, marked a significant milestone in the Fiji National University's (FNU) commitment to transforming research into practical solutions that benefit communities across Fiji and the Pacific.

The launch, which was held at FNU Bonunaqwele Campus in Nadi, highlighted the University's vision of strengthening sustainable agriculture, empowering rural communities and ensuring that innovation reaches those who need it most.

The South Pacific Extension and Development Institute (SPEDI) is a specialised research and knowledge-exchange institute established in 2025 within the College of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (CAFF) at FNU. SPEDI operates at the intersection of academia, field practice, and policy, bringing together researchers, extension professionals, development partners, and rural communities to support climate-smart innovation, sustainable agriculture, applied research, entrepreneurship, and

community development across Fiji and the Pacific.

While officially launching SPEDI, *Former President of the Republic of Fiji, Na Gone Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, described the institute as a vital investment in the future of agriculture and rural development.

"SPEDI gives practical expression to the vision we have gathered here to celebrate. It represents an investment in the future of agriculture, rural development and our communities by ensuring that knowledge does not remain within institutions, but reaches our farmers, villages and young people," said Ratu Wiliame.

He added that the institute would bridge the gap between research and practice while bringing together innovation, traditional knowledge and community leadership.

"It creates a bridge between research and practice, between innovation and tradition, and between the wisdom of our ancestors and the opportunities of tomorrow," Ratu Wiliame stated.

FNU Vice-Chancellor, Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, said SPEDI would ensure that the work of Landcare continues beyond individual research projects by serving as a regional platform connecting universities, researchers, extension services, farmers and communities.

"SPEDI represents FNU's commitment to ensuring that the work of Landcare continues well beyond the life of any single research project," Professor Nabobo-Baba said.

The Vice-Chancellor reiterated that the institute would be driven by the LIFE (Livelihood Improvement Facilitative Extension) Model, demonstration farms, climate-smart model villages, entrepreneurial innovation and FNU's Vanua Research Framework, ensuring research is translated into meaningful action across the Pacific.

Founder of SPEDI, Dr William Kerua, said the institute was established on the belief that universities have a responsibility not only to teach and conduct research but to create lasting impact within communities.

"SPEDI was created from a simple yet profound conviction: that the true impact of a university is not only found within classrooms, laboratories and research publications, but in the positive changes we create in the lives of people and communities beyond our walls."

"For too long, our region has faced a challenge, where valuable research and innovations do not always reach the farmers, communities, and entrepreneurs who need them most. SPEDI is designed to address this gap," he said.

Read more on Page 2



(L-R) Pro Vice-Chancellor Corporate Services, Professor Nii- K Plange ACIAR Regional Manager - Pacific, Mai Alagcan, Vice-Chancellor Professor Unaisis Nabobo-Baba, Dean CAFF Associate Professor, Dr Kaliova Ravuiwasa, CAFF Associate Dean Research Dr Mereia Fong. Photo Credit: Penioni Kolinisau

Dr Kerua further highlighted that SPEDI would address the long-standing challenge of valuable research failing to reach farmers, entrepreneurs and rural communities by bringing together researchers, students, industries, government agencies and communities to co-create practical solutions.

“Guided by the Vanua Research Framework, the institute will combine indigenous knowledge with scientific research through a participatory, community-led approach to build resilient and sustainable livelihoods,” Dr Kerua stated.

For more information on SPEDI, please click on the link <https://www.fnu.ac.fj/south-pacific-extension-and-development-institute-spedi/> or email on spedi@fnu.ac.fj, contact Dr William Kerua, Founder SPEDI, CAFF, FNU, Koronivia Campus, Nausori, Fiji Tel: +679 3479200 Ext 5166.



CAFF staff garland former first lady, Ms Filomena Katonivere & the former President of Fiji Na Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere. Photo Credit : Penioni Kolinisau



The Diploma in Vanua Leadership students (Sausauvou) performing the traditional welcoming ceremony to Na Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata Ratu Wiliame Katonivere. Photo Credit : Penioni Kolinisau



CAFF staff members with the Diploma in Vanua Leadership students (Sausauvou) performing the traditional welcome ceremony. Photo Credit: Penioni Kolinisau



ACIAR Reaffirms Partnership with Fiji at International Conference

BY WATI TALEBULA

The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) has reaffirmed its longstanding commitment to Fiji and the Pacific, highlighting the importance of strong research partnerships and community-led approaches to addressing the region's growing agricultural and environmental challenges.

Speaking at the International Landcare Conference hosted by the Fiji National University (FNU), ACIAR Acting Chief Executive Officer Dr Nick Austin said it was particularly fitting for the conference to be held in Fiji, a country where ACIAR has worked as a trusted partner for more than four decades.

"It is particularly fitting that this conference is hosted here in Fiji, a country where ACIAR has worked as a trusted partner for more than four decades," Dr Austin said.

The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research is Australia's specialist agricultural research broker and funder, working to address real-world sustainable development challenges across the Indo-Pacific.

Since its establishment in 1982, ACIAR has invested in research that supports smallholder farmers and rural communities to strengthen food and nutrition security, improve livelihoods and promote sustainable natural resource management.

Dr Austin said ACIAR's partnership with Fiji dates back to 1983, making it one of the organisation's longest-standing partnerships in the Pacific.

A cornerstone of the partnership is ACIAR's collaboration with national institutions, particularly FNU, which Dr Austin said plays a critical leadership role in education, science and applied research in Fiji and across the region.

"Through our partnership, we are strengthening local research capability, supporting the next generation of scientists and ensuring that solutions are grounded in Pacific knowledge and priorities," he said.

The partnership spans joint research programmes, capacity-building initiatives and scholarship pathways, including the ACIAR Pacific Agricultural Scholarship Support (PASS) programme.

Dr Austin said the investment was not only supporting individuals but also strengthening institutions that anchor science and education across the Pacific.

Currently, 38 ACIAR scholars are undertaking postgraduate studies across the Pacific and in Australia, while nearly 70 Pacific Islanders have completed postgraduate qualifications since the programme began.

"These graduates are now contributing as researchers, scientists and senior officials, shaping agriculture, fisheries



Dr Nick Austin Photo Credit : ACIAR

and livestock systems across the region. We are proud of what they have achieved," Dr Austin said.

He also acknowledged the contribution of FNU Vice-Chancellor Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, who serves not only as the University's Vice-Chancellor but also as a member of ACIAR's Policy Advisory Council.

Dr Austin said Professor Nabobo-Baba's role helps ensure Pacific voices continue to shape ACIAR's strategic direction and work.

ACIAR's collaboration with Global Landcare and FNU is also a key part of its engagement in Fiji, particularly through the project Landcare: An Agricultural Extension and Community Development Model at District and National Scale in Fiji.

The project is testing whether the Livelihood Improvement through Facilitated Extension (LIFE) model, which has been successfully applied in the Philippines, can be adapted to Fiji's social, cultural and governance context.

Dr Austin said the initiative reflected ACIAR's belief that sustainable development outcomes are not achieved by simply importing ready-made solutions, but by working with communities to co-design approaches that reflect their knowledge, priorities and lived experiences.

The project brings together Fiji, Australia and the Philippines in a trilateral partnership, combining scientific research with farmer knowledge and community leadership.

Across Fiji, communities such as Matalolo and Korobua in Vanua Levu have been supported to restore degraded landscapes through agroforestry and integrated farming systems.

Household food gardens are strengthening nutrition and reducing vulnerability, while farmers are producing compost and livestock feed from locally available materials, reducing costs and supporting more circular agricultural systems.

Riparian restoration initiatives are also protecting waterways and strengthening community resilience to flooding and the increasing impacts of climate change.

A key feature of the work is its focus on inclusion, ensuring women and marginalised groups actively participate in and benefit from community development initiatives.

Dr Austin said the project had also created a productive three-way knowledge exchange between Fiji, the Philippines and Australia, providing a strong example of South-South-North learning, an approach he said the International Landcare Conference exemplified.

The conference has attracted participants from Australia, the Philippines, New Zealand, Japan, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and various African countries, highlighting the growing international relevance of Landcare and sustainable agriculture.

Dr Austin said the need for such collaboration was becoming increasingly urgent, particularly as the Pacific remains one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions.

The challenges facing Fijian farmers, including extreme weather, land degradation, market access and dependence on imported food, are challenges that communities around the world are increasingly likely to experience.

"ACIAR's research in Fiji demonstrates how technical research, when paired with community-led approaches, can produce improvements in livelihoods and environmental sustainability," he said.

Dr Austin said Landcare was central to this approach because it was not a top-down programme, but a methodology that empowers communities to take ownership of their land, livelihoods and future.

He said research provides the evidence base, data, documented outcomes and comparative analysis needed to understand what works and how successful approaches can be adapted and scaled across communities and regions.

"By continuing to invest in research that supports sustainable land management and food security, and by partnering with community-driven movements such as Landcare, we can strengthen smallholder livelihoods across the Pacific and demonstrate that community-led, evidence-based approaches can achieve impact at scale," Dr Austin said.



FNU Conference Strengthens Regional Collaboration for Sustainable Agriculture



Facilitated by Mr Clinton Muller, the panel featured Dr Mary Johnson, Ms Io Dum, Dr Nick Edgar, Dr Noel Catibog, Mr Alan Peterson and Associate Professor Dr William Kerua, who shared their experience, insights and perspectives of strengthening Landcare initiatives across diverse communities. Photo Credit : Penioni Kolinisau

BY WATI TALEBULA

The Fiji National University (FNU) has strengthened its role in advancing sustainable agriculture, agricultural extension and community-based natural resource management through the successful hosting of the 2026 Fiji International Landcare and Sustainable Agriculture Conference.

Hosted by FNU's College of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (CAFF), the three-day conference brought together farmers, researchers, extension practitioners, policymakers, government representatives, development partners and community leaders from Fiji and across the wider Indo-Pacific region to share knowledge, experiences and practical solutions to common agricultural and environmental challenges.



Associate Professor Dr William Kerua. Photo Credit : Penioni Kolinisau

The conference formed part of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR)-funded project, Landcare: An Agricultural Extension and Community Development Model at District and National Scale in Fiji.

The project is led by RMIT University in Australia and delivered in partnership with FNU, Fiji's Ministry of

Agriculture, Waterways and Sugar Industry, Tei Tei Taveuni, the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development, the University of the Philippines Mindanao, the University of the Philippines Los Baños and Global Landcare.

RMIT University Project Leader Dr Mary Johnson said the conference demonstrated the strength of collaboration across institutions, communities and countries working towards sustainable agriculture and rural development.

Dr Johnson said the diversity of participants was one of the conference's greatest strengths, creating an important platform for knowledge exchange and collaboration.

"What made this conference so valuable was the diversity of people in the room. We had farmers, researchers, policymakers and community leaders all sharing their experiences and learning from each other," Dr Johnson said.

"Those conversations are what drive innovation and help us find practical solutions that support both communities and the environment across the Indo-Pacific."

The conference was also a key deliverable of the ACIAR Landcare Project, providing an opportunity to showcase project outputs and outcomes, share lessons learnt and discuss challenges, while learning from the experiences of others working in sustainable agriculture and community development.

FNU Research Lead for the Landcare Project, Associate Professor Dr William Kerua, said the conference also contributed to the strategic priorities of both FNU and CAFF.

"The conference was one of the deliverables of the ACIAR Landcare Project to showcase our project outputs and outcomes, share our learnings and challenges with others, and learn from the experiences shared during the presentations," Dr Kerua said.

He added that hosting the conference fulfilled a key performance indicator under the FNU and CAFF Strategic Plan 2024–2026.

The conference also highlighted the strong international partnerships underpinning FNU's Landcare initiatives, bringing together researchers, extension practitioners, development partners and government representatives from across the Pacific.

For Fiji, the conference provided an important opportunity to showcase local innovation in sustainable agriculture and community-based natural resource management while connecting local stakeholders with regional and international expertise.

Dr Johnson said the impact of the conference would extend well beyond the event itself.

"The conference was an important opportunity to showcase local innovation in sustainable agriculture and community-



RMIT University Project Leader Dr Mary Johnson. Photo Credit : Penioni Kolinisau

based natural resource management. By connecting local stakeholders with regional and international expertise, we create opportunities for lasting impact that extend well beyond the conference itself," she said.

She also acknowledged the support provided by ACIAR and the project's national and international partners.

"This support demonstrates our shared commitment to strengthening agricultural extension systems, supporting farmers and creating opportunities for knowledge exchange," Dr Johnson said.

Dr Kerua said the conference reflected FNU's growing contribution to sustainable agriculture and rural development across the Pacific.

"Our responsibility extends beyond teaching and publishing research; it is about walking alongside our rural and Pacific communities and ensuring that knowledge generated within our institution translates into tangible, lasting impact on the ground," he said.

The conference reflects FNU and CAFF's ongoing commitment to strengthening partnerships, connecting research with communities and supporting practical, community-driven solutions for sustainable agriculture and rural development across Fiji and the wider Pacific.

Ram Aspires to Become an Industrial Arts Educator



Krishal Ram. Photo Credit : Silika Damu

BY NICOLETTE CHAMBERS

For Krishal Ram, becoming an Industrial Arts teacher has been a lifelong ambition since Year 11. The Year 13 student of Savusavu Secondary School believes he is one step closer to turning that dream into reality following the Fiji National University's (FNU) annual Student Liaison Outreach Programme at his school earlier this month.

The 18-year-old currently serves as a Senior Prefect at Savusavu Secondary School.

"It has always been my goal to teach Industrial Arts because I am passionate about the field," he said.

Ram is grateful for the unwavering encouragement and sacrifices of his parents and is determined to make them proud while inspiring his school and family through education and practical skills.

Deputy Head Girl Sisilia Taraivini, who hails from Nukubalavu Village in Savusavu, also shared her aspirations of pursuing a career in Law.

"I learnt that to study Law, I need to achieve good grades in English alongside the required subject combination," she said.

Taraivini hopes to make history as the first member of her family to enter the legal profession.

Savusavu Secondary School is the largest secondary school in Cakaudrove Province. Established in 1970, the school is home to 834 students and 45 teachers.

Uluivalili College Principal Commends FNU



Uluivalili College Principal, Rupeni Vulaca during the FNU team's visit. Photo Credit: Silika Damu

BY NICOLETTE CHAMBERS

Nestled in the heart of Wailevu, Savusavu, Uluivalili College is home to 197 students and 19 teachers under the leadership of Principal Rupeni Vulaca.

More than an educator, Mr Vulaca is a mentor who encourages and inspires his students to dream big despite the school's location, 47 kilometres from Savusavu Town

on Vanua Levu.

He expressed his appreciation to the team from the Fiji National University (FNU), which visited the school earlier this month as part of its annual Student Liaison Outreach Programme, covering schools across the Cakaudrove, Macuata and Bua provinces.

"This visit is very timely since the students have just completed their mid-year examinations and we are now conducting a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of their results and performance," he said.

"The presentation by FNU will assist them with the career choices they will make, especially our Year 12 and Year 13 students as they begin setting goals for their future and selecting their subject pathways.

"We are 47 kilometres away from Savusavu Town and having the FNU team visit our school is a valuable opportunity for us."

Head Boy, Livai Baleivolivoli, said that after listening to the presentations, his dream of pursuing Public Health at FNU next year felt more achievable.

The 18-year-old hails from Natua Village in Wailevu West, Savusavu.

"My parents have always advised me to secure a good job, and that has always stayed with me. It motivates me to keep working hard towards my goal," he said.



Uluivalili College Headboy Livai Baleivolivoli. Photo Credit: Silika Damu

Waqalevu Aims to Become First Medical Professional in Her Family

BY NICOLETTE CHAMBERS

Determined to make history in her family, St Bedes College Head Girl, Iowana Waqalevu, dreams of becoming the first medical professional in her family.

The 19-year-old hails from Nailou Village in Tunuloa, Savusavu, and aspires to pursue the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) programme at the Fiji National University (FNU) next year.

Waqalevu was grateful for the opportunity to meet the FNU team when they visited the school earlier this month as part of the University's annual Student Liaison Outreach Programme, where students learnt about the wide range of academic programmes and opportunities available.

Driven by a passion to serve others and make a meaningful difference in people's lives, Waqalevu said studying medicine had long been her ambition.

"I've always been interested in this programme because I like to help people," she said.

A proud catholic student, Waqalevu credits her family as her greatest source of inspiration and encouragement.

"My mother is a science teacher at St Bedes College, while my father is a dedicated yaqona farmer. I am thankful to my parents for always supporting my education," she added.



St Bedes College Head Girl, Iowana Waqalevu. Photo Credit: Silika Damu



Students of St Bedes College in Savusavu. Photo Credit : Silika Damu

Building a Hospitality Industry Without Barriers

BY CHRISTAL KAPOOR

Fiji's greatest strength as a tourism destination has never been its breathtaking landscapes alone, it is its people.

This powerful message set the tone for the 2026 National Hospitality Conference, where leaders from government, industry and academia gathered to explore, how inclusivity and service excellence can shape the future of Fiji's hospitality sector.

Hosted by the Fiji National University's (FNU) National Training and Productivity Centre (NTPC), this year's conference challenged delegates to rethink hospitality beyond traditional tourism settings. With the theme "Service Without Barriers: Empowering Diversity in Business and Service Excellence," discussions focused on creating workplaces and customer experiences that are welcoming, accessible and inclusive for everyone.

While officially opening the conference, the Permanent Secretary for Tourism and Civil Aviation, Ms Salaseini Daunabuna, urged organisations to embrace innovation while preserving the authentic human connection that has made Fiji renowned for its world-class hospitality. She emphasised that removing barriers, whether physical, social or cultural, is essential to ensuring every visitor, employee, and community member can thrive.

In welcoming delegates, FNU Vice-Chancellor Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, reminded participants that hospitality is ultimately about people.

“This year's theme reminds us that hospitality is, above all, about how we welcome others, how we serve them, and how we ensure that everyone feels respected, valued and included,” she said.

Professor Nabobo-Baba also highlighted the University's commitment to developing future-ready professionals through quality Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

She added that between 2019 and 2024, FNU graduated more than 69,000 individuals through its TVET programmes, including over 11,000 graduates in tourism and hospi-

tality-related fields.

The conference featured renowned local and international speakers who shared practical insights on accessible tourism, sustainable business practices, inclusive leadership and workforce development.

More importantly, it reinforced a shared vision that by investing in people, embracing diversity and strengthening collaboration, Fiji can continue to set the benchmark for hospitality excellence on the global stage.



(L-R) NTPC Head of Training Department of Tourism, Hospitality and Travel, Sheileshni Nair, Permanent Secretary for Tourism and Civil Aviation, Salaseini Daunabuna, FNU Vice-Chancellor Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, FNU PVC TVET, Dr Isimeli Tagicakiverata. Photo Credit : Penioni Kolinisau

Creating Safe Spaces Starts with Conversation - Wahid

BY CHRISTAL KAPOOR

Creating workplaces where people feel safe to speak up is essential to building stronger teams and delivering exceptional service, according to Global HR Business Partner Mr Maivon Wahid.

The London-based human resources leader delivered an engaging presentation on psychological safety and inclusive leadership at the Fiji National University's (FNU) 2026 National Hospitality Conference, before moderating the conference's closing panel discussion.

While reflecting on the event, Mr Wahid said the conference successfully unpacked the theme, “Service Without Barriers: Empowering Diversity in Business and Service Excellence,” by encouraging conversations that are often avoided in workplaces.

“Service without barriers was so well unpacked because we spoke about many of the issues we have in Fiji. More importantly, we had sensitive conversations and di-

alogues that we don't usually have,” said Mr Wahid.

Mr Wahid tadded that psychological safety and mental health remain emerging topics in Fiji, largely due to cultural attitudes that discourage people from openly expressing their struggles.

“Psychological safety is more than a buzzword. We need to create safe spaces where people feel comfortable sharing their experiences without fear of judgement. It's not about gossiping, it's about understanding what is happening around us, and being accountable as leaders and colleagues,” he emphasised.

He further stated that his interactive presentation encouraged delegates to reflect on real workplace experiences and consider how they could foster more supportive environments.

Looking ahead, Mr Wahid said he hopes to continue contributing to Fiji's development by introducing more conversations around psychology and therapeutic approaches to leadership.

“My intention is to bring psychological safety and psychology into Fiji and give back the knowledge and experience I have gained. If I'm invited back, I'll be here,” reiterated Mr Wahid.



Maivon Wahid during his presentation at the 2026 NHC Photo Credit : Penioni Kolinisau

Fiji Airports CEO calls for businesses to embrace purpose alongside profit

BY CHRISTAL KAPOOR

Fiji Airports Limited Chief Executive Officer, Mesake Nawari, challenged business leaders to rethink traditional measures of success, urging organisations to pursue profit and purpose together, during his presentation at the National Hospitality Conference (NHC) 2026.

Speaking on the theme, “Profit and Purpose: Driving Corporate Value Through Sustainable Innovation,” Mr Nawari said long-term business success depends on creating value not only for shareholders, but also for communities, employees and the environment.

“For many years, businesses believed they had to choose between profitability and sustainability. The organisations of the future will be those that create economic value while delivering lasting benefits for society,” Mr Nawari stated.

Using Fiji Airports as a case study, Mr Nawari highlighted how the organisation has embedded sustainability into its long-term strategy, with investments in digital transformation, renewable energy, infrastructure and customer experience aimed at strengthening Fiji's position as the aviation hub of the Blue Pacific.

He further described airports as more than transport facilities, calling them economic ecosystems that drive tourism, trade, investment and national development.

“Every decision we make has an impact far beyond our balance sheet. Every infrastructure investment, every sustainability initiative and every customer experience improvement creates value not only for Fiji Airports, but for Fiji itself,” said Mr Nawari. He also outlined ambitious plans for the organisation, including smart airport technologies, artificial intelligence, expanded renewable energy projects and sustainable infrastructure development, all designed to improve operational efficiency while supporting long-term economic growth.

Mr Nawari also encouraged organisations to adopt bold leadership and innovation by



FNU Vice-Chancellor Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (left) with Fiji Airports CEO, Mr Mesake Nawari at the 2026 NHC. Photo Credit : Penioni Kolinisau

asking two fundamental questions, which are : how they create financial value and how they create societal value.

“The future belongs to organisations that can successfully answer both,” Mr Nawari elaborated.

FNU Empowers Students to Champion Inclusion

BY ROMEKA KUMARI



Gender-Based Violence Adviser for Pacific Women at The Pacific Community, Ms Farzana Rahim.
Photo credit : Romeka Kumari

The Fiji National University (FNU), in partnership with The Pacific Community (SPC), has reaffirmed its commitment to fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment through a Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Workshop held at the Nasinu Campus on Saturday, 18 July 2026. The workshop brought together Student Environment Ambassadors, hostel residents, and staff and students from the FNU Disability Centre for a day of learning, discussion and collaboration.

Participants explored practical ways to strengthen inclusion across the University while promoting respect, accessibility and equal opportunities for all. The event was officiated by FNU Director of Academic Learning and Teaching, Mr Rusiate Vakaloloma, and Gender-Based Violence Adviser for Pacific Women at The Pacific Community, Ms Farzana Rahim. Mr Vakaloloma said the workshop reflected FNU's ongoing commitment to ensuring diversity and inclusion remained central to the University's teaching and



FNU staff and students during the GEDSI workshop. **Photo Credit:** Romeka Kumari.

learning environment. "GEDSI workshops reinforce our shared responsibility to promote gender equality, embrace diversity and ensure that everyone, regardless of their background or ability, has equal opportunities to learn, contribute and thrive," he said. "An inclusive university is one where every student feels a sense of belonging. When we create environments that value different perspectives and experiences, we strengthen our academic community and prepare graduates to become compassionate

and responsible leaders." Ms Rahim said GEDSI was fundamental to building stronger and more resilient communities across the Pacific. "GEDSI is about ensuring that no one is left behind. By creating safe spaces for dialogue and learning, we empower individuals to challenge barriers, celebrate diversity and become advocates for positive change within their communities." She added that meaningful inclusion required a shared commitment from both institutions and individuals.

Kiribati Student Inspired to Advocate for Inclusion



Alfred Tekamaeu Tiorim conducted a presentation at the GEDSI Workshop. **Photo Credit:** Romeka Kumari



Krishal Prasad participated in the GEDSI Workshop. **Photo Credit:** Romeka Kumari

BY ROMEKA KUMARI

Understanding the difference between sex and gender has transformed the way Fiji National University (FNU) student Krishal Prasad views equality, respect and inclusion following his participation in the University's Gender Equality, Disability and Social

BY ROMEKA KUMARI

First-year Fiji National University (FNU) medical student Alfred Tekamaeu Tiorim says participating in the Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Workshop has inspired him to become a stronger advocate for equality and inclusion in his home country of Kiribati. A Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) student at FNU's College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS), Tiorim was among the participants at the workshop organised by the University's Counselling Services under the Department of Student Support Services within the Office of the Registrar. The workshop equipped participants with practical knowledge on gender equality, disability inclusion and social inclusion while promoting respectful communication, empathy and a greater understanding of the challenges faced by different members of society. Reflecting on the experience, Tiorim said the workshop broadened his understanding of inclusion and inspired him to help create more equitable communities. "As a Kiribati student, it was a good opportunity to

participate in the GEDSI workshop. It taught me not only about gender equality but also encouraged me to reflect on the situation in my own country," Tiorim said. "Kiribati has experienced a concerning rise in gender-based violence, and despite being a small island nation in the Micronesian region, the statistics remain alarming. The workshop helped me understand the importance of creating an inclusive environment, recognising the different challenges people face and communicating with respect and empathy." Tiorim said the workshop had equipped him with practical knowledge that he hopes to share with communities back home. "I want to contribute towards building a society where everyone, regardless of their background, gender, ability or religion, feels safe, respected and included." He encouraged fellow students to participate in similar programmes, saying they provide valuable opportunities to broaden perspectives, challenge stereotypes and become advocates for inclusion. "Learning goes beyond the classroom. Workshops like this equip students with the awareness and skills to make a positive difference in their communities and become voices for inclusion."

GEDSI Workshop Inspires Future Inclusive Leaders

Inclusion (GEDSI) Workshop. The College of Engineering, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (CETVET) student said recognising the distinction between the two concepts was one of the workshop's most valuable lessons, helping him better understand the importance of respecting individual identities and fostering inclusive communities. A Diploma in Architectural Drafting student, Prasad said the workshop challenged misconceptions, broadened his perspective and encouraged him to embrace diversity in everyday life. "My key takeaway from this workshop is understanding the difference between sex and gender," Prasad said. "Sex refers to biological characteristics. It is determined by physical and reproductive attributes that classify individuals as male or female." "Gender, on the other hand, refers to the roles, behaviours and expectations that society associates with being a man

or a woman. These roles and responsibilities are shaped by social and cultural norms rather than biology." "This understanding has helped me appreciate the importance of respecting people's identities and promoting equality and inclusion in all aspects of life." Prasad said the workshop encouraged participants to reflect on their attitudes and behaviours while fostering greater awareness of diversity and inclusion. He added that creating an inclusive environment begins with understanding, empathy and respect for others, regardless of their background, identity or ability. "The workshop reminded me that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of who they are or where they come from." "It also showed me that small changes in the way we think and interact with others can make a big difference in creating a more inclusive environment," he added.

Health & Hustle

From Village Kitchen to Pacific Food Systems:

How FNU Lecturer Asaeli Naika is Shaping Healthier Futures

BY CHRISTAL KAPOOR

Growing up in the village of Batiri in Nadroga, Asaeli Naika never imagined that cooking alongside his mother would one day shape a career influencing nutrition, agriculture and sustainable food systems across the Pacific.

Today, as a lecturer and researcher at the Fiji National University's (FNU) College of Engineering, Technical, Vocational Education and Training (CETVET), he is helping prepare the next generation of food and nutrition professionals while contributing to regional conversations on food security, climate resilience and healthier communities.

Despite his work with government, international organisations and regional partners, Mr Naika remains grounded in the values he learned as a child.

"Food has always been more than something we eat. For us in Fiji and across the Pacific, food connects us to family, culture and our ancestors," he said.

That belief has shaped a career dedicated to ensuring Pacific communities not only have enough food but have access to food that nourishes both people and the planet.

A passion born in the family kitchen

Raised in a close-knit family, Mr Naika spent much of his childhood in the village where his father taught. His earliest memories are not of classrooms or sporting fields, but of the family kitchen.

At just four years old, he proudly made his first tiny roti over a traditional firewood stove.

"Sundays became an unofficial cooking competition between my mother and me, as we challenged each other to make the best curry with my father as the judge," he recalled with a smile.

Those moments sparked a lifelong curiosity about food. His mother also introduced him to the profession of dietetics through stories about a relative who later became Fiji's Chief Dietitian and managed the National Food and Nutrition Centre.

"I am certain that conversation planted a seed," he said.

While others saw food as something ordinary, Mr Naika began to see it as a powerful way to improve people's lives.

Following his passion

When it came time to choose subjects in secondary school, Mr Naika took a path that challenged expectations.

Instead of following more traditional options, he chose Home Economics with a specialisation in Food and Nutrition.

"My father secretly wanted me to become a teacher. But he also knew how much I loved food," he said with a laugh.

Encouraged by his parents and teachers, his interest in



Mr Asaeli Naika. Photo Credit : Roshel Singh

cooking gradually evolved into a passion for understanding the science of nutrition and its impact on health and society.

After completing secondary school, he enrolled at the University of the South Pacific. Although he initially received a teaching scholarship, he made the bold decision to transfer into a Bachelor of Science programme so he could pursue his passion for nutrition.

It was a decision that would shape the rest of his career.

Looking beyond the plate

Following graduation, Mr Naika joined the National Food and Nutrition Centre, where he spent almost a decade contributing to nutrition surveys, food security initiatives, policy development and community programmes throughout Fiji.

Working alongside experienced nutrition professionals broadened both his knowledge and perspective.

"At first it was intimidating, but those women became some of my greatest mentors. They taught me resilience, professionalism and the importance of never stopping learning," he said.

As his experience grew, he realised nutrition could not be separated from agriculture, climate change or food production.

Rather than waiting for others to make those connections, he championed the integration of nutrition into national

conversations on agriculture, climate resilience and sustainable development.

He also presented on topics such as breastfeeding and climate change during Fiji's preparations for COP23, helping demonstrate that nutrition has an important role in conversations far beyond hospitals and clinics.

"If we want healthier people, we also need healthier food systems," he said.

Bringing experience into the classroom

Mr Naika later joined the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), where he expanded his expertise through projects focused on community food processing, food security, climate resilience and emergency response across Fiji.

The experience reinforced an important lesson.

"Encouraging people to eat healthy food is only part of the story. We also need to understand how food is grown, processed, distributed and made affordable," Mr Naika stated.

In 2020, he joined Fiji National University as a lecturer in nutrition.

Although teaching had never been part of his original plan, he soon realised he had been educating people throughout his career, whether through community programmes, agricultural training or public health initiatives.

Today, his students benefit not only from textbooks, but from years of practical experience gained in villages, government ministries, international organisations and regional development programmes.

His students learn that nutrition is about far more than calories and dietary guidelines. It is about culture, agriculture, climate resilience and, most importantly, people.

Investing in healthier futures

Alongside teaching, Mr Naika continues to contribute to research focused on Pacific food systems, school nutrition, sustainability and climate resilience, reflecting FNU's commitment to research that responds to the needs of Pacific communities.

Whether mentoring young researchers, working with regional partners or contributing to food security initiatives, his focus remains unchanged and that is helping build healthier and more resilient food systems for future generations.

Looking back, Mr Naika sees a common thread running through every chapter of his journey.

From the little boy proudly making tiny rotis in a village kitchen to the academic helping shape regional conversations on nutrition and food security, every step has been guided by curiosity, purpose and a willingness to embrace new opportunities.

INSIDE FNU is a monthly newspaper which aims to promote the University's activities to the wider community.

This newsletter is produced by the Public Relations and Communications team at the Division of Marketing and Communications.

Publisher: Fiji National University
Editor: Manager Public Relations and Communications, Fulori Turaga
Design & Layout: Vetaia Dakua & Roshel Singh
Division Head: Director Marketing and Communications, Ella Bennion
Writers: Christal Kapoor, Nicolette Chambers, Romeka Kumari, Wati Talebula.

INSIDE FNU wants to HEAR FROM YOU

INSIDE FNU welcomes submissions by staff and students for publication in the newsletter. Please send your suggestions, comments or articles for consideration to mprc@fnu.ac.fj

