FIJI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

FNU News

Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, Honourable Rosy Akbar with students at Vodafone Arena.

SEC inspires young students to take-up STEM careers

More than 200 students from eight primary schools in the Central Division are participating in the inaugural Science and Engineering Challenge (SEC) organised by the Fiji National University (FNU) and the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the University of Newcastle, currently underway at the Vodafone Arena in Suva.

The SEC is aimed at addressing the skills shortage in science and engineering by inspiring young people to study mathematics, physics and chemistry in high school. It provides students with an exhilarating day where they compete with other school groups in engaging and demanding science and engineering-based activities.

Of the 208 students registered today, 45 percent are females with one all-boys school participating.

While officiating at the event this afternoon, Chief Guest Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, Honourable Rosy Akbar, reiterated that research confirms training in STEM subjects serve as a platform to higher-paying jobs and is an important linchpin to a growing economy. "STEM careers are in demand worldwide. Fiji has also recognised this need as we lack skills from STEM sector to contribute to our growing economy whether they help build roads and bridges, new machinery, analyse data, crunch statistics to help policymakers decide on new policies or create new farming technologies," said Honourable Akbar. "We challenge our students' perception of science and engineering and give them an inter-school challenge scope."

Honourable Akbar said, in 2020, the Education Ministry will be promoting STEM in the primary schools using basic equipment starting in the remote schools. She said the Ministry was serious about addressing the country's skills shortage and providing exciting opportunities for the students.

"In 2019-2020 Budget the Fijian Government will continue to fund 950 Local National Toppers Scholarships and 20 Overseas Scholarships in relevant study programmes, which are priority areas for Fiji, specifically medicine, engineering, technology and education."

Minister Akbar said there is a need for our next generation to choose a career that is not ordinary.

"We need to address our skills shortage and promote study to work in one of those areas which will certainly lead to employment. However, we need students to make a commitment to their country of birth and stay to help us grow the economy for the benefit of all Fijians."

Saurav Praveen, Year 6 student of Suva Primary School.

Honourable Akbar challenged the students to take a broad view of the opportunities across the full spectrum of sectors in searching for jobs. "You should look beyond the traditional sectors and consider other exciting and cutting edge opportunities," she added.

Acting Vice Chancellor for the Fiji National University, Professor Mohini Singh said FNU is very excited to be a partner for the event as the University has a large number of science, engineering and technology programmes on offer and is continuously working with the Ministry of Education, government and industry to upgrade and deliver relevant programmes in the field.

As a technology expert herself, Professor Singh said she is very glad to see such enthusiasm being displayed by the students and wished them well.

Team Leader SEC at the University of Newcastle, Adriana Zaja said the team was excited to assist in the execution of this event.

"The science and engineering challenge as a programme runs over 170 event days throughout the year in Australia and very rarely we are granted this opportunity to go internationally," said Zaja.

"This is the first time such a programme has come to any Pacific Island country – Fiji is the first and we hope that the students realise that they already have a potential to achieve in STEM subjects."

"The programme is also aimed at making students realise that careers in STEM can be fun and fulfilling."

Zaja said there are eight different science and engineering challenge activities set-up for the students to participate in.

"The fun and hands-on activities involve principles of science, engineering and technology. The concept is to immediately engage students in the activity with a minimum of introduction and theory. Students can explore scientific principles for themselves rather than being guided to a predetermined answer."

Activities include building a hovercraft, wiring a virtual city and so forth. Year 6 student of Suva Primary School, Saurav Praveen was excited to construct a Styrofoam glider with his team members.

"We are trying to build a Styrofoam glider that will be shot into the air from a battery-powered launcher. We have been told that the gliders will be tested for greatest flight distance, as well as flight and landing accuracy."

"The activity has been fun so far and has boosted my interest in the field engineering," said Praveen.

Schools participating in today's event are Gospel Primary School, Nehru Memorial Primary, Rampur Primary School, Rishikul Primary School, Suva Muslim Primary School, Suva Primary School, Vashist Muni Primary School and Marist Brothers Primary School.

The challenge provides students with an opportunity to appreciate and learn of the diverse roles scientists and engineers in shaping the future.

Vashist Muni Primary School was crowned the champion of the Primary division. Rishikul Primary School was the runners-up while Suva Muslim Primary School was placed third.

Eight secondary schools will participate in the event tomorrow.

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