

Introduction of the Institute of Human Rights Research

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Good afternoon Everyone; Ratu Epeli Nalatikau, Hon Members of the Judiciary, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be able to brief you all about the Human Rights Research Institute being launched today with our partners.

The Institute (IHRR) is being launched by way of an Memorandum of Understanding between the University of Fiji and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (which everyone knows represents the pinnacle of international human rights work through the Human Rights Council in Geneva), and the Pacific Island Development Forum, a regional organisation involved in cutting edge development work in the Pacific.

The Justice Devendra Pathik School of Law of the University of Fiji is proud indeed to be associated with such distinguished partners in our joint effort to provide more insights through rigorous research, and in-depth debate and discussions with like-minded scholars, about human rights concerns in Fiji and the Pacific and, by extrapolation, of course, the rest of the world.

The new Institute will not only provide a deeper understanding of human rights norms, its aim is also to facilitate a rigorous exchange of ideas including in the form of a think tank where both practical human rights work and new approaches to policy will be debated and analyzed in an environment of collegiality and common purpose- not only to understand the world, but to **transform it for the public good.**

It will carry out cutting-edge and policy-oriented research and analysis by bringing together scholars both from the region and from further afield. It will be a place

and space where ideas, at times undoubtedly controversial ideas, will be tested and explored.

Our MoU represents a milestone for the University of Fiji's programmes. It will have the purpose of expanding the JDP School of Law's already significant postgraduate work within the University.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the JDP School of Law, named after a well-known Fijian jurist, Justice Devendra Pathik, opened its modest doors in 2006 with only a handful of students but has, over the past decade, quietly established itself as a popular alternative to conventional legal education and training. We emphasize critical legal theories in our courses and focus students' attention on advocacy for the common good; we also try to provide students with a more sophisticated understanding of the complex world in which we all live.

Our students in the SoL are trained not only to be good lawyers but also good citizens. The motto of the School is *'face to face learning in the Fijian context'*.

Very much tongue-in-cheek, as we know we have NO resources whatsoever compared to the other two University's Law Schools in Fiji and the region, in all our advertising billboards, we echo the magnificent Tina Turner ... that *'We're Simply the Best'*! It's up to others to continue the next line and state, hopefully enthusiastically, that we are *'better than all the rest!'*.

Ladies and Gentlemen, within the School our Post-graduate International Relations and Diplomacy programme already provides a certain type of education for senior members of the public service, NGOs and the disciplined services. Thus the Institute will **pedagogically** be housed in the intersection of law and international relations and diplomacy; this represents a unique entity not replicated anywhere else that we know of.

The Institute is designed to facilitate collaboration with scholars, other research Institutes and universities around the world. We are expecting international scholars to spend their sabbaticals with us, and we want to develop a cohort of IHRR Fellows who will work with us to frame questions and offer solutions to pressing human rights problems facing us all in the 21st century.

But we are going to be open not only to like-minded scholars- inevitably some others will join us over time who will undoubtedly challenge our own thinking as we will challenge theirs. The Institute will thus be a place where public good ideas

will flourish and, combined with research, set the framework for innovative human rights advocacy and practice (we want to set the world alight!).

What is also planned is the development of a high level scholarly publications profile of the Institute which will draw international attention to human rights issues in the Pacific. These will be in the general subject of human rights and freedoms, including but not limited to, climate change and migration, disabilities and mental health, the Sustainable Development Goals, democracy and good governance, business, and the environment, the subjects mentioned already by our partners and Ratu Epeli this afternoon in his own keynote address.

Another intention of the Institute is to raise awareness of human rights through short educational courses and incubators that focus on specialized areas of human rights discourse for everyone- for example young people- to safeguard future generations- as well as for human rights defenders, law enforcement officers, judicial officers, businesses, civil society, the public service sector, the media, Parliamentarians, lawyers, and anyone that may be affected.

It will also collaborate and advocate with others by forging new partnerships in capacity building and develop a media profile that will draw attention in innovative ways to the solutions we offer and not just to highlight problems.

However, ladies and gentlemen, we will also face impediments, not just the funding, but also the limited intellectual environment of the socio-economic and political spheres.

We also know that Universities everywhere are overtaken nowadays by the serious malaise of emphasizing and producing research and publications that no one reads. The publications languish in on-line locations and dusty library shelves and are available only to a special few with the luxury to spend time in them.

Research, more often than not, is conducted to facilitate career paths of academics, and for promotions and renewal of contracts. We are also told that 'industry' will tell us the kind of education we must provide and, in order to find employment for our students once they graduate, we need to partner with industry.

The unfortunate part of university life in the current climate is that 'academic enterprise', and the 'industry', as well as 'the bureaucracy' have overtaken what used to be intellectual activity and stimulation as well as exploration of the mind. Ideas that set the world, or at least parts of it, free in the past, and ideas that many

people, including Nelson Mandela whose life is commemorated today, suffered for.

But, with this Institute we want to reclaim intellectual, not just academic, endeavour...Not in any Ivory Tower, esoteric kind of way...that would be equally disastrous....we don't want any absent-minded professors wandering around mumbling to themselves- instead, our dream is to foster the kind of intellectual activity in human rights research that will be rigorous, challenging and, ultimately, will transform the world and our place in it.

Because the world does need transforming, Ladies and Gentlemen (we all know it), and public good intellectuals are needed just now, at this point in world affairs, to rescue everyone from pedantic academia that has become a regressive force in society.

The University of Fiji's Strategic Plan states that the University's work includes being **the critic and conscience of society** and thus we see this Institute as epitomizing for us that progressive (management speak) KPI; not only that, but it will employ **academic freedom**, which is protected by a special provision in the University of Fiji Act, in achieving it.

Now I would like to explain to you (by way of an illustration) the life of our Human Rights Research Institute. This illustration is the only example of that wonderful word, '**serendipity**' that I know.

The idea of a Human Rights **academic and research focus** was first mooted many years ago at the Fiji Human Rights Commission but it received its impetus as a research institute from a chance meeting and conversation between **Joseph Camillo** (formerly of the Fiji Human Rights Commission, and now at SoL Unifiji) and **Mark Borg**, an old friend from UNDP days, now of the PIDF; Mark talked to **Francois, PIDF's SG**, and to **Chitra** as the new OHCHR Regional Rep., and then Chitra, the beautiful intellectual that she is (and initiator of a human rights centre in her university at Nottingham while she was still a student), invited all of us for a meeting in her boardroom, where we drew up our collective ideas on her whiteboard and developed our framework.

After that **Evelyn (a public defender from Manhattan NY, no less)**, by then the SoL's new **Academic Development Coordinator** began drafting the concept paper, along with **Rileshni** who had joined Chitra's team (she is a graduate of University of Fiji in BOTH Law and International Relations- a double Masters!)

and she facilitated the MOU drafting (OHCHR are experts at that!), by now joined by **Thomas** who I had known in my UN Special Rapporteur and Working Group days in Geneva OHCHR. PIDF's **Afsrin**, also a key part of the team, is the person who could do really fancy presentations of our various iterations and she gets our motley crew organised and in place at the right times, and then we had **Swasti** re-join from Unifiji SoL, who began to organise today's MOU signing event itself once we had a date.

Most importantly though for us, **Professor Subramani** as AVC embraced the idea of the Institute as a jolly good one for helping to kick-start the intellectual life of Unifiji (thank goodness he became AVC at the right time as he was my English lecturer at USP and most of my radical ideas have roots in his teachings!) and then, most importantly, Unifiji's **Executive Director Finance, Ravineet Sami** looked at our SoL budget in another way to accommodate in-house resource re-allocation.

So, here we all are- what you see now, Ladies and Gentlemen, is a **Movement**.

The movement now consists of the rest of the JDP SoL too- can my colleagues please join us.

And anyone else from the audience that wants to join us.

So, as you can see Ladies and Gentlemen, we are **not just a Movement, we are a Village**.

We look like we are from all over the place, and we are - from the far reaches of the earth, (somebody had a word for people like us recently - the 'V' word- probably not a bad word but they used it pejoratively I think).

But, as you can see, as we can clearly illustrate, that under the shelter of the Institute of Human Rights Research we, all of us, no matter where we hail from originally, have found a home in Fiji.

Our Common Enterprise is Human Rights Research for the Public Good.

Ladies and Gentlemen, honoured friends, this is serendipity!

MC, thank you Sir for allowing this disruptive group to commandeer the stage.