

# UniFiji Watch



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## Preserving the indigenous in a multicultural environment

“A NATIONAL project to preserve and strengthen Itaukei identity and heritage.”

That’s the bold ambition of the Centre of iTaukei Studies, an innovative institution that allows the University of Fiji to showcase, preserve and promote indigenous traditions in a multicultural environment.

At its new campus in Nasova, Levuka, a living classroom style of learning is unfolding. It is a mode of learning that allows students to work closely with villagers through community projects and research. It has helped Itaukei students to fill gaps in their knowledge – gaps attributed to westernisation.

The Nasova campus, opened on March 16, 2026, is the second outpost of the Centre of iTaukei Studies after it was set up at the main campus in Saweni, Lautoka.

While still in its formative years, the centre has gradually increased its student numbers, a reflection of the centre’s success. It has also been getting great feedback from its graduates out in the workforce, creating connections in the community and identifying what it means to be iTaukei.

The Saweni campus is building a foundation to build another Center of Itaukei Studies.

Usaia Gaunavou, the acting Director of the Centre, said the programme works to restore dying traditions that keeps indigenous people connected to their roots.

“The center has to develop our culture through academic and traditional learning,” Mr Gaunavou said, pointing out that it continues to serve as an institute to protect and promote traditional indigenous knowledge within this multicultural country.

**By Osea Navuda & Avitesh Ram**

The living classroom style of learning at Nasova was introduced by University Vice-Chancellor Dr Shaista Shameem, who said it meant “students learn with people doing real, everyday things, rather than in a traditional classroom. For example, on the drua that the university supports, students learn celestial navigation, others learn in village gardens”.

“They also learn about fishing, and planting mangrove, and helping protect coral reefs.

Mr Gaunavou said the centre also allows students to get a better appreciation of different cultures. It now draws students from the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The programme draws from a shared Melanesian

heritage, unique regional financial benefits and the opportunity to study indigenous knowledge systems that is applied across the Pacific.

Professor Shameem said the university chose Nasova for its Levuka campus because of its place in Fiji’s history. It was where the Deed of Cession was signed – a physical reminder of Itaukei path to modernity.

The centre there will be “a vital hub for cultural empowerment, linguistic research, teacher training and community outreach” that emphasises not only academic efforts, but will also be a national project to preserve and strengthen Itaukei identity and heritage.

The centre was officially launched on August 17, 2007 on the Saweni Campus in Lautoka. A few months later, it began offering courses in iTaukei Language, Literature, and Culture. Since then, it has grown into a

vital part of the university. It has become a beacon of hope for those who want to see indigenous knowledge treated with the respect it deserves.

In May it opened its Ovalau outpost.

The centre focuses on three main activities: teaching, research, and publishing. Through its courses, students learn to speak, read, and write in iTaukei. They also study the rich traditions of storytelling and cultural expression. Through research, the centre looks for practical solutions to the challenges facing indigenous Fijians today. These include land rights, economic opportunities, and cultural preservation. Through publishing, it shares new findings with the wider community.

The centre works closely with other groups and institutions. It sees itself as a forum for important conversations about multicultural issues. Whether partnering with government agencies, community organisations, or cultural groups, the centre is always looking for ways to share knowledge and resources. Its goal is to become a true centre of excellence for iTaukei art and culture. It wants to be a place that the whole nation can be proud of.

Professor Shameem, in highlighting the specialised education in iTaukei culture that the centre offers said it ensures that indigenous knowledge remains central to academic discourse.

“Our Centre for iTaukei Studies is unique in Fiji,” she said.

“We’re the only university that offers a dedicated centre specifically for iTaukei studies — that means culture, language, performance, art, and craft.”

### The community must be involved



Usaia Gaunavou, left, is the man in charge of the iTaukei Centre as its acting director.

He holds a Master of Arts in Language, Literature and Culture from the University of Fiji. He also has diplomas in management, public administration, and tertiary teaching. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Literature, Language and Education from the University of the South Pacific. With his academic knowledge and a deep love for his community, he knows that a centre like his cannot succeed by staying inside the university gates. His view is that it must reach out to villages, elders, schools, and anyone who cares about iTaukei culture.

## Celebrations for university’s big birthday

THE University of Fiji celebrated its 21st birthday last month with events that included an arts show and a book launch.

Celebrations at both the campuses in Suva and Saweni showed how the university had grown, and what it had achieved including how it has influenced higher education in Fiji and around the Pacific.

Launching the celebrations, Minister for Education Aseri Radrodro it was a time to mark a journey of vision, resilience and achievement, emphasising the University’s role in producing graduates who are helping shape what Fiji is becoming.

He noted the University’s international standing

through its accreditation by the UK-based Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, ensuring globally recognised qualifications for its graduates.

Arun Padarath, national president of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji, the parent organisation of the university, said the institution’s journey reflected decades of vision and commitment to accessible, culturally grounded education.

The university was built on “vision, sacrifice, commitment and a clear belief in the transformative power of education”.

The Pro-Chancellor, Pt. Bhuwan Dutt, highlighted the longstanding role of the Sabha in advancing educa-

tion through the collective efforts of leaders, donors, staff and partners who contributed to the University’s growth.

The Pro-Chancellor also emphasised the University’s founding principles of service, equality in education and the promotion of human values, noting that these continue to guide its development.

The celebrations also featured the unveiling of an exhibition dedicated to Pt Vishnu Deo now permanently displayed on the walls of the Pt V.D. Memorial Hall, honouring his legacy as a pioneering leader, educationist and advocate for social justice in Fiji.

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# Students recognised for their efforts and excellence

THE University of Fiji celebrated the achievements of 268 graduates at its 2026 graduation ceremony in April.

Students from a range of faculties and academic disciplines were recognised for completing their studies, with family, friends, university staff and invited guests gathering to witness the special occasion.

The ceremony highlighted not only the academic success of the graduating class but also the out-

standing performances of students who excelled in their respective fields.

The Vice-Chancellor's Award, one of the highest honours presented by the university, went to Arisha Meenal Sami. The award is for a graduate who exemplifies academic excellence, leadership and dedication throughout their studies.

Arisha also won the School of Business and Economics gold medal.

Priyashel Kumar won the gold medal for the School of Humanities and Arts, and Zakiah Khan won the award in the School of Science and Technology.

Shreya Shristi Narayan won the gold medal for the Umanand Prasad School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

A total of 26 gold medals were awarded to top-performing graduates across various categories.



All smiles ... graduating students ready to get their awards



Top journalism graduate Tanisha proudly shows her awards

## Journalism gold for a hard worker

By Nehaal Prasad

DETERMINATION and perseverance helped Tanisha Bi win a gold medal with her Bachelor of Journalism and Media Studies this year.

The proud student said her journey wasn't easy. Her achievements came through staying strong and focused on her goals.

"My success comes from determination, perseverance, and the motivation to create a better future for my family," Tanisha said.

She explained that she was raised in an impoverished family, with her father as the only breadwinner. But it meant she learned how important hard work is.

And despite the financial difficulties and personal fears, she refused to give up.

In an interview with the

FijiVillage website, she revealed that there was a time she almost quit, but her mother's encouragement and the reminder of how important education was for young girls motivated her to continue pursuing her journalism training.

She says she overcame these challenges through perseverance, managing her finances carefully and gradually becoming more confident and independent.

Tanisha chose to study journalism and media studies because she likes communicating. One of the high points of her course was being appointed editor of UniFiji watch, which gave her opportunities to gain experience

and improve her skills.

Tanisha said her parents were her biggest supporters. They had made many sacrifices so that she could succeed.

Tanisha's capabilities and her polished qualifications through her journalism training has meant she quickly found a job as a media relations officer at the University of Fiji.

She also plans to continue her education by studying for a postgraduate diploma in international relations in the hope that this will open more opportunities for her.

Her message to other girls and young women is to stay in school and work hard.

She said the power of education is that it can help shape a better future, helping girls to become strong and independent women.

## Kamy well on his way fulfilling his dream

By Nehaal Prasad

Kamy Kauna, a 21 year graduate from University of Fiji, achieved a gold medal after successfully completing his Bachelor of Medical Health Science.

His success has not been easily achieved.

Despite financial problems he kept his eyes on the prize – his dream of becoming a doctor kept him going.

He said there were times when he felt like his journey was coming to an end but his belief in himself and in God kept him working harder day by day.

He said his dream has kept him focused no matter how tough a time he was having.

"Excuses couldn't stop me from becoming something better in life," said Kamy.

Describing the financial problems he faced, he said there were days when he did not have enough money to pay for his fare and also cater for his resources at once.



With a gold medal under his belt, Kamy Kauna plans to keep studying for a medical degree

However, this excuse couldn't stop him. Kamy gave special credit to his mother, who was his biggest supporter. He said that she stood by him no matter what. Her support gave him strength to continue his studies and believe in himself.

Now that he has graduated with a gold medal, Kamy plans to continue studying as he dreams of becoming a doctor. He said that he likes to share his journey with everyone, as other students facing the same difficulties will stay motivated.



Bloriane Nirambath receives her degree certificate from Pro-Chancellor Pandit Bhuvan Dutta. But Cyclone Vaianu meant her family could not be there

## Cyclone dashes family plans

THERE was a touch of disappointment amid the joy as Vanuatu student Bloriane Nirambath, 22, proudly received her Bachelor of Medical Health Science after two years of study in Fiji.

Her graduation became especially emotional because her family could not attend the ceremony in person.

Bloriane's siblings – two sisters and a brother – had travelled from Port Vila to watch her get her degree.

By Sereina Teilemb

However, when the graduation ceremony was postponed because of Cyclone Vaianu, they all had to return home before the rescheduled event because they could not change their flight tickets – costing nearly \$4,000 for flights and accommodation.

But the family were able to watch the ceremony through a live stream on the

university's Facebook page. Bloriane later spoke by phone with her mother, Morine, who shared how emotional her father, Jules, was as he watched his daughter receive her qualification.

Her mother said her father burst into tears.

"We are so proud of her for coming this far. Even though we could not be there, seeing her graduate made every struggle worthwhile," her parents said.



# ‘Blood, sweat and tears’ for her art



By Avitesh Ram

EMERGENT – it’s a fitting title for the first solo exhibition by young local Fijian artist Hefrani Barnes.

The presentation of paintings is another step in bringing Pacific art from the shadows and into the light. It serves as both a cultural milestone and a platform for social commentary, expressed through local materials and vivid colour.

Barnes’ work deliberately juxtaposes everyday local resources – black sand from Wailoaloa Beach in Nadi, coconut husk, and bark – with culturally significant items such as tapa, kuta, and ‘apei mats.

The exhibition notes ask: “What is of common value to all? Justice, hope, love, and a duty of care for the living and non-living.”

Barnes’ debut was hosted by the University of Fiji’s Suva central campus as part of the university’s 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary celebrations.

The exhibition’s title also reflects Barnes’ personal and artistic journey. Living with epilepsy, the artist has produced 20 works that address climate disasters, fuel crises, body autonomy, and regional conflict.

“Her storytelling stood out to me,” said Letila Mitchell, former director of the Fiji Arts Council, founder of the Pacific Arts Alliance, and chief guest of the evening. “It wasn’t just art meant to pretty up someone’s wall. Each of her pieces was a con-



Hafreni Barnes, left, and an example of her artwork: ‘Reliving Evacuation’, a comment on the past, the present and the future of war

versation about a real issue.”

She noted the significance of the moment for a young artist from Fiji.

“It’s a very hard career to undertake,” she said. “But we carry knowledge and stories from one generation to the next.”

Barnes’ mother, Maureen Penjueli, spoke of the personal cost behind the collection.

“[Hafreni] suffers from epilepsy, and she has delivered this entire 20-plus collection through blood, sweat and tears,” Penjueli said. “This is a

very important moment for her and her career.”

She urged parents to support children pursuing creative paths.

The university’s artist-in-residence Mason Lee acknowledged the university’s support for local artists and said creative talent in Fiji often goes unrecognised.

“University of Fiji has changed that,” Lee said. “The support and belief they have given me has created a space where artists can lead and showcase their work.”

The exhibition was funded by the Pacific Island Feminists Alliance for

Climate Justice (PIFa4CJ) in partnership with the University of Fiji.

Barnes herself was unable to attend the opening of her exhibition. But her message to the audience was: “Faith, nature, human emotions, awareness, culture and tradition. These guide my path as an artist.”

On the challenges facing young Fijian artists, she responded simply: “Lack of support to be recognised.” Her advice to students was direct: “Think twice. Or if you’re bold enough, take up the role and make it count.”

## Real-life workplace where students can test their skills



THE best thing about UniFiji Watch, apart from its design which is an art form in itself, is the breadth of its coverage.

I have had the experience of being interviewed several times during the 21st anniversary celebrations in March and I was impressed with the depth of the questions put to me.

The University’s anniversary events allowed the JMS students to also interview such significant public figures as the Tuvaluan and Fijian Ministers of Education, ambassadors, eminent Fijian musicians, authors of books recently published and avant-garde artists.

These opportunities are not normally available to journalism students; however, there is much to be said for plunging aspiring reporters right into the thick of events.

This edition of UniFiji Watch shows the value of deep submersion tactics in media studies.

We are fortunate to have senior journalists at all levels not only to train our students but also to provide opportunities for internships where students can earn bylines.

The JMS 201 class is currently making their own documentary films and I look forward to seeing the final results.

As our print journalism students hone their interviewing skills, learn how to take pictures, grasp the techniques of page layout and design, and try to craft out clever and informative headlines, they can test these abilities out on a publication, UniFiji Watch, very much like the ones they will be working on once they leave the university environment.

They learn to develop story ideas, work accurately and efficiently on assigned stories, and to deliver on deadlines – as they would be required to in a newsroom.

The newspaper, started by the first batch of journalism students in 2022, has grown into a publication that provides a testing ground for our journalism students

It is wonderful that we are able to see ourselves as both learners and teachers, or even as artists, as we carve out a space for our type of journalists in Fiji and the world.

## The peace of night hours is time for making art

ALAMANDA DATT, a 39-year-old mother of five, is proof that family responsibilities are no hindrance to the pursuit of one’s personal passion.

She is the first painter in her family, and her work is the result of years of building on her talent.

She describes art as a part-time job, a choice she made to balance her responsibilities at home, where her 16-year-old son requires care that rule out her chances of committing to a full-time job.

Through her art, she is able to contribute financially to her family’s needs.

Datt draws from the peace of the quiet hours at night, in a routine that has helped her achieve precision in her work. Painting brings with it a sense of calm

and personal fulfillment, she said.

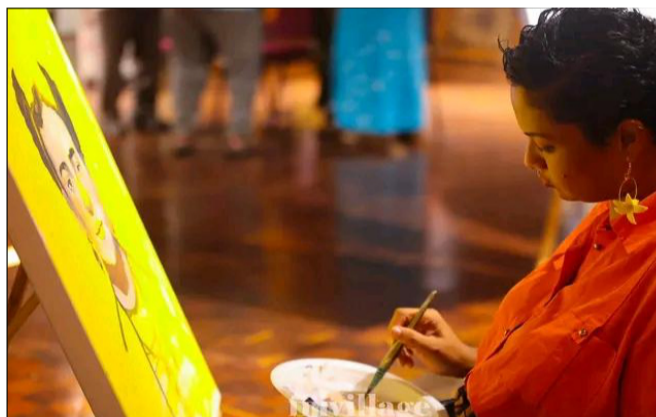
Datt encourages young females to “go for it”.

“You will make mistakes, but that should not stop you,” she said. “When doing something worthwhile, you may be bad at the first step, and that’s okay you don’t have to be good right away.”

Datt was one of several artists taking part in the University of Fiji’s Women’s Art Exhibition in Suva.

Others included Datt’s younger sister, Stephanie, Vindhya Fernando of Sri Lanka, and Georgia Greymore of Sigatoka.

By Kenesi Ratu



Alamanda Datt: painting brings calm and personal fulfilment

## The music of Bollywood storytelling

By Risha Maharaj

A NEW book focuses on how music helps to tell a story in classic Hindi cinema.

The author, Dr Jasmine Sofia Jannif, dedicated her study to her late father, Sahu Khan, whom she described as a Bollywood fanatic and music enthusiast.

“Sentimental Songs, Melodrama and Filmic Narrative in Bollywood’s Golden Age (1951–1963)”, was launched during the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary celebrations of the University of Fiji.

Dr Jannif said her father, when she was growing up, was building up a photo restoration and framing business.

“As a family, we were constantly surrounded by songs.

With this background, it is not surprising that I



Dr Sofia Jannif: Songs are a primary source of storytelling

developed a kind of curiosity towards film songs,” she said in a newspaper interview.

“My late dad was a small businessman at that time who on Sundays would do his book-

keeping as well as photo restoration manually. There were no computers or photo shops at that time.

“For me, it was a joyous honour to play records for dad every Sunday while he worked.”

Dr Jannif argues that a world without music is “barren” and that songs are a primary source of storytelling. At the launch, she focused on Bollywood’s significant cultural shift from the poetic, Urdu-influenced lyrics of its “golden age”, to the Hindi-English fusion of its modern productions.

The book’s launch is part of the university’s broader “Renaissance” vision, which recently included the inauguration of the Oceanic Centre for Advanced Thinking and Renaissance and a historic partnership with RMIT University.



# UniFiji Watch



The University of Fiji  
(An Entity of Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji)

June 2026

## YOUR SAY: Will the US and Israeli attacks on Iran contribute to peace in the Middle East?



**Pariksha Prasad – Year 1 Bachelor of public health and primary healthcare student**  
The attacks are likely to increase fear, anger and violence instead of bringing peace. Peace usually comes through dialogue, not more attacks.



**Osea Navuda – Year 1 Journalism student**  
I don't think it brings peace, it only brings chaos. People in higher positions need to talk things out because the safety of the nations are in their hands.



**Salanieta Corerega – Year 1 Bachelor of nursing student**  
So honestly, I think American and Israel attacks on Iran will probably increase tension and cause more conflict, as countries may retaliate. These attacks are likely to worsen the situation than fix it.



**Seini Naibarai, Year 1 journalism student:**  
No, they are unlikely to contribute to peace in the Middle East. Instead they have escalated tensions and destabilised regional security, although a temporary ceasefire has been brokered.



**Avitesh Ram – JMS Administrative Assistant at Suva Central Campus**  
No, I don't think so. Attacking Iran would probably escalate tensions, provoke retaliation, and further destabilise the region, rather than contribute to peace.

## Unique musical tribute to great leader

By Avitesh Ram

UNIVERSITY students and staff again paid tribute to one of Fiji's greatest leaders as the University of Fiji marked Ratu Sukuna Day with the launch of a specially-composed song and a series of cultural and educational activities across its campuses.

The university released what is believed to be Fiji's first jazz tribute dedicated to Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, titled Ancient Lands and the Superstar, as part of its annual Ratu Sukuna Day commemorations.

The song was composed by UniFiji music director Sailasa Tora, produced by musician Simi Rova and featured official cover artwork designed by University artist-in-residence Mason Lee.

The tribute was officially launched through the University's Vox Populi Radio Station and also released in partnership with news website Fijivillage.

University Vice-Chancellor Professor Shaista Shameem said the celebrations reflected the institution's commitment to honouring the legacy of Ratu Sukuna and the values he stood for, and continuing to recognise his contribution to Fiji's development, diversity and unity.

The university organised exhibitions across its Saweni, Samabula and Levuka campuses showcasing important stages of Ratu Sukuna's life, including his childhood, military service in the French Foreign Legion and his leadership as a statesman.

A special video programme on Ratu Sukuna's life was also screened for students and staff throughout the day.

Professor Shameem said Ratu Sukuna's teachings remained relevant to Fiji today.

"His message was about diversity, peace and leadership by example," she said.



University artist-in-residence Mason Lee, second from left in front row, and Josaia McNamara, left, with Ratu Sukuna Memorial School students and other university staff at the Ratu Sukuna Day celebrations

The university also joined celebrations at Ratu Sukuna Memorial School where students took part in painting, weaving and cultural activities.

The school invited artists Mason Lee, Josaia McNamara and Anare Somumu, along with other painters through the Fiji Arts Council, to work alongside students.

Vice-principal Kuini Vitukawalu said the celebrations reflected Ratu Sukuna's vision of embracing both traditional and modern cultures.

"This year we are concentrating on the other cultures in Fiji. "That is what this man stood for in those years – the man of two worlds," she said.

## Better access for Tuvalu

MORE Tuvaluan students could soon be on campus under a deal signed between the Tuvalu government and the University of Fiji.

Tuvalu's Minister of Education, Mr Hamoa Holona said a new partnership with UniFiji will significantly increase access for his nation, with expectations that student numbers could grow substantially in the coming years.

"Hopefully in the next few years,

probably a hundred or more of them will be here at the University of Fiji," he said.

Mr Holona said the new deal "is about education opportunities, a win-win situation for both of us".

He also expressed interest in reviving initiatives similar to the Fiji Volunteer Service Scheme, which saw experienced teachers deployed to support schools in Tuvalu, which could help address staffing gaps, particularly in primary schools.

## UniFiji Watch

*UniFiji Watch is planned and produced by students and staff of the Journalism and Media Studies department of the University of Fiji.*

*It allows students to develop the*

*research, writing and design skills that they will need once they enter the work environment.*

*Send any contributions to Avitesh Ram at aviteshr@unifiji.ac.fj*

## A little corner of Indian culture

A "Bharat Corner", designed to be a gateway to India's rich culture and knowledge, has been set up in the University's library.

The special space, inaugurated by the Indian High Commissioner, Suneet Mehta, will provide students with resources about India's history, ideas and traditions.

At the opening ceremonies, Pro-Chancellor Pandit Bhuvan Dutt Arya Ratna

thanked the Indian government and stressed the importance of language and culture in keeping one's identity strong.

Mr Mehta described universities as "temples of learning."

He said the Bharat Corner will give students a permanent space to explore India's intellectual world, helping to create understanding and collaboration between the two countries.