



## **Ministerial Statement**

### **COMBATING THE BRAIN DRAIN PHENOMENON.**

Mr Speaker Sir,

Hon Prime Minister

Hon Deputy Prime Ministers

Members of Parliament

Ladies and Gentlemen

### **Introduction**

Honourable Speaker, in the tourism industry, the challenge before us is to combat the issue of brain drain.

This challenge is central to ensuring the sustainable growth of our tourism industry, which serves as a cornerstone of our nation's economy.

We will note Mr. Speaker that the reality about our economy today is that it is bullish, which is very different from what our detractors were saying that our economy was going nowhere.

On Friday, Westpac reviewed its position on the Fiji economy which it had downgraded initially, due to ... quote “ stronger than expected sentiments and growth in tourism... the tourism numbers are a lot stronger than we expected”.

Further adding that the new Fiji Airways service to Dallas is ‘a growth driver... it’s a big positive. .’ . unquote.

The signing of the new Air Services Agreement between Fiji and the USA last week in Tonga, will open vast possibilities in the US as articulated by the Hon Prime Minister in his Ministerial Statement on Tuesday.

In terms of Banks, ANZ had earlier upgraded its forecast for Fiji, pegging it at 3.4% also riding on the back of tourism.

## **Investment in Training.**

Mr Speaker, we are committed to creating world-class training facilities that will drive Fiji's tourism industry forward.

Our strategy includes collaboration with private sector stakeholders, and the development of cutting-edge facilities that meet the highest global standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir,

Fiji is blessed that a good number of international brands are operating in our country. I can venture to say, they have found a home in Fiji.

These brands have their culture with their ethos, systems and standards that are global and available for our people once they become part of the brands in Fiji.

Our people acquire skills that are marketable globally... i.e. it is the easiest way to become a global citizen...after a few years

with a brand in Fiji, you qualify to join any of that brand's property globally.

And brands are indication to travellers that a destination has quality offerings.

## **Hotels**

Let me highlight some of the programs with the brand hotels:

The Marriott International Fiji Training Academy offers structured training in key areas such as Front Office Operations, Housekeeping Operations, Food & Beverage Service Operations, and Kitchen Operations. They would have trained some 800 professionals of late.

The Hon Minister for Education is looking at the *possibility* of linking this Academy to the Higher Education Commission and thereby strengthen partnership with Government.

The Marriot properties comprise, Sheraton Resort and Sheraton Villas, Westin, Marriot Momi and Sheraton Tokoriki.

The Radisson Blu Resort Fiji is renowned for its robust 'Train the Trainer' program designed to continuously enhance the knowledge and skills of its people, ensuring that they remain competitive and well-prepared for the demands of the traveller today, known for its high expectations.

Hilton has its very own Hilton University which is ***available on-line*** for every single position in the industry. The courses include programs from Harvard, LauSanne and Cornell universities.

Hilton has a dedicated recruitment executive who recruits on "Attitude" and "Desire to Learn" as Hilton can train the candidates with skills across most of their business.

On three consecutive occasions, Hilton has been awarded the Great Place to Work certification, a global recognition and says much for Hilton in Fiji. They also won the Regional Team Member Promise Award for Hilton Australasia and the South Pacific which include Australia, NZ, PNG, Vanuatu and Fiji.

Intercontinental has seen staff members that departed Fiji return and take back their positions which is attributed to the culture at Intercontinental.

It has a robust training and development program for its people and evident in all its Fiji properties... Natadola, Holiday Inn, GPH and Crowne Plaza.

Shangri-La, the largest resort with some 700 staff members, had seen high attrition rates for its people at levels 1 to 3, mostly to Australia and New Zealand.

It has implemented robust hiring and retention strategies, including partnerships with educational institutions for training programs, cross exposure with sister properties and internal promotions for filling critical Managerial positions.

The training programs are tailor made to suit Fiji, categorized at 3 levels: **Essential**, **Functional** and **Leadership Trainings**. The past two years have seen intense activities and many challenges post pandemic...they have done very well and known to be a top performer in the Shangri-la group.

The global brands are known for how well they look after their people, for instance in the case of Sofitel:

- minimum wage is much higher than the national minimum wage and within 3 months it increases by 5%.
- bonus scheme tied to business performance and attendance i.e. not to be absent for more than 4 days...bonus would be in the range of \$1200.00 net by year end.
- access to senior management training including external placements such as in Australia and even France.
- full medical family insurance for Middle management and up.

- educational assistance for courses that benefit both their career and the organization.
- dedicated learning and development division running a minimum 800 hours of training per month.
- after 6 months staff can apply for internal hotel cross training for other positions available within the Resort.

Other brands such as Outrigger, Warwick and Wyndham are also operating in Fiji, all with well-established programs to recruit and train to retain staff.

And of course, we have our very own Tanoa Group with properties in Fiji and the region.

Independent operators have their own programs, and most are emulating what the big brands are doing.

A recent phenomenon is the conversion from Independent to Brand and many going that way after COVID. Pre COVID, Brands were growing their portfolios mostly through new



properties and less on conversion at the ratio of 80/20, but now it's 40/60.

As recently announced, Vanua Levu will have its first brand through Wyndham in Labasa, owned by the Damodar Group.

The hoteliers are all part of Fiji Hotels Tourism Association (FHTA) the pre-eminent tourism industry association that represents their interests. FHTA has a very powerful voice and plays a big role in combating the brain drain phenomenon.

## **Aviation Services**

Our aviation sector is a critical component of Fiji's tourism industry, and we have invested heavily in world-class training facilities.

Unfortunately, the brain drain phenomenon is quite severe in aviation.

According to ICAO, the number of passenger and cargo numbers will double by 2036. This will call for more pilots, engineers, air traffic controllers, and other related aviation jobs. Countries will poach from each other.

The Fiji National University is gearing up to this challenge. At its Nadi campus, it trains our people for LAME which is Licensed Aircraft Maintenance Engineering. It runs for 3 years taking in 30 intakes each year...the applications come at a rate of applicants 200 to 300 each year.

It will be adopting the NZ standards which takes two years and graduates can qualify for jobs in the Pacific, including Australia and NZ. FNU is looking at doubling its graduates each year and the Govt of Australia through DFAT is playing a huge supporting role following the visit of the Hon Pat Conroy a few months ago.

FNU will expand into pilot training and is grateful that Fiji Airways has donated a A330 MFTD (maintenance and flight

training device) Flying simulator to help in this area. This expansion will cost some \$10 million. FNU Nadi is now the center for aviation in the Pacific with huge cost benefits for our neighbours i.e. it cost 10 times as much to train in Australia than in Fiji.

We are also in discussion with certain governments in underwriting a Master's program in Aviation through FNU.

Fiji Airports Ltd operates the Fiji Airports Aviation Academy offering specialized courses in Air Traffic Management (ATM), Aviation Fire Fighting Services, and Air Traffic Safety Electronic Personnel under the Aviation Training Institute Certificate issued by CAAF.

All the courses are recognized by ICAO.

The training equips its people to manage the Nadi Flight Information Region (Nadi FIR) which covers some 6 million square kilometres.

Of course, such highly trained people are very marketable, and they continue to move to developed countries such as Australia and NZ, requiring the Academy to continue to increase its intake of trainees.

The Fiji Airways Aviation Academy, located near Nadi International Airport, stands as a beacon of excellence. This fully integrated training center offers state-of-the-art facilities, including full flight simulators and advanced training devices.

In the coming weeks Fiji Airways will be commissioning two new Flight Simulators and two new Flight Training Devices.

These resources provide unparalleled training for Fiji Airways flight and cabin crew, as well as for other global aviation entities, reinforcing Fiji's reputation as a leader in aviation excellence.

Fiji Airways is a high performing organization employing some 2,200 talented employees. It has successfully navigated the challenge of retaining its key skillsets through some key effective measures, such as:

- their remuneration strategy; paying competitive, market benchmark salary.
- best practices focus.
- leadership development, with inclusive strategies to improve women in leadership.
- harnessing the learning culture in the organization.

Our national airline is a source of pride, standing 14<sup>th</sup> in excellence in the top 100 airlines globally. It was awarded the best airline in Australia and the Pacific for 2024.

On pilots training, we grow our own pilots through the South Pacific Aviation Training Institute (SPATI) at Nausori International Airport: The Pacific Flying School and Advanced Aviation Training (Fiji) Ltd in Nadi.

These institutions with their modern facilities and up to date training aids are producing graduates who now hold significant positions in regional airlines such as Fiji Airways, Air Vanuatu, and Airlines of Papua New Guinea. ..some are flying huge jets in the busy corridors in the Middle East and Europe.

### **Inbound Operators**

Coordinating the ground arrangements of the tourist is a very challenging task and this falls into the domain of the Inbound operators and the like, such as rental car companies. They also conduct their own training, and a leader is the Rosie Academy which has found the brain drain phenomenon, as not all bad, as it allows younger intakes into the industry. Some that have departed have returned as the grass is not always greener at the other side.

### **Health and Wellness Tourism**

As we continue to develop Fiji as a premier tourist destination, we also focus on emerging sectors like health and wellness tourism.

This niche market offers significant opportunities for growth and requires a workforce trained in specialized areas such as health and wellness services, spa management, and holistic therapies.

There are those that say, TAKE MY WEALTH, GIVE ME BACK MY HEALTH.

A prime example of this commitment to health and wellness tourism is the Pacific Specialist Healthcare in Namaka, Nadi.

This locally owned facility offers world-class services and the doctors and medical staff are mostly local, trained in the Fiji School of Medicine and Fiji Nursing schools.

For general wellness, a number of academies provide training, such as:

- Spa Academy Fiji-Essence of Fiji based in Nadi.
- Lumiere Academy at Lautoka
- FIT College working collaboratively with FNU, FNTC, and Pivot Point all across Fiji.

## **Training Providers**

Fiji is blessed with a good number of Training Providers under the watchful eyes of the Higher Education Commission who provides them with accreditation, ensuring the training programs align with industry needs.

This requires close collaboration between educational institutions and industry stakeholders to develop relevant, up-to-date curricula that reflect the latest industry trends and demands.

The Training Providers are:

- Fiji National University** offering diplomas, degrees, and post graduate degrees in tourism and hospitality.



**-University of the South Pacific** offering a wide range of courses and programs in tourism and hospitality at undergraduate and higher degree levels.

**-Fiji National and Productivity Centre (NTPC)**; a division of FNU providing vocational and skills based training in hospitality, tourism management, and culinary arts.

**-Australian Pacific Training Coalition (APTC)** offering training, and qualifications in hospitality, tourism and related fields.

**-Pacific Polytech**, which has taken over some of the campuses operated by the Technical Colleges that have closed. They provide training and education in hospitality and tourism at the certificate level.

**-Vishan Infotech** provides hospitality programs.

**-Pacific Technical Institute** provide tourism and hospitality albeit on a small scale.

**-Servis Pro**, long in the business and has made huge impact across the community.

Most of these Training Providers receive Government Grant.

## Scholarships and Government Grants

Affordability or money is a significant factor and the Coalition Government is committed to providing substantial financial support through scholarships, grants, and other incentives.

These initiatives are designed to make education more accessible and to encourage our people to build their careers here in Fiji.

These financial supports are not merely about reducing the cost of education; they are about creating opportunities for growth, development, and long-term career success.

Beyond traditional scholarships, the **Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation** has initiated targeted **government grants** aimed at fostering innovation and encouraging the development of niche tourism markets.

These grants are available to entrepreneurs and businesses that are developing new tourism products or services, particularly in emerging areas such as eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and adventure tourism.

By providing financial support to these innovators, we are encouraging the development of a more diverse and resilient tourism sector.

## **IMMIGRATION.**

For Tourism and Civil Aviation, it is not only about stemming the brain drain, but also to ensure that we don't have any gaps in terms of manpower in our organizations. We have to be able to find replacement from abroad and this requires an accommodative Immigration system.

The Coalition Government is committed to resolving the challenges relating to Immigration. A Committee consisting of DPM Finance and Trade plus Minister for Home Affairs meet

weekly with the Growth Reset Team (private sector volunteers) and Immigration senior officials to resolve issues related to Immigration.

This involves a focus on all permit processes with a plan to speed up processing. Automation of work permits is a key focus presently which will lead to significant improvements and expected to go live by Monday 9<sup>th</sup> Sept 2024.

## **Conclusion**

Honourable Speaker, the comprehensive approach we have outlined today highlight our commitment as a nation to addressing the brain drain phenomenon and ensure the continuing health and sustainability of tourism and civil aviation.

Global labour mobility is here to stay, but our vision is clear: to create a tourism industry that not only drives economic prosperity but also serves as a model of excellence in training, career development, and innovation.

By working together, we can overcome the challenges before us and build a brighter future for Fiji—a future where our people thrive, our economy prospers, and our tourism industry remains a beacon of excellence on the global stage.

Thank you.