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From Laucala Bay to the Region: The University of the South Pacific

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One of the most significant institutions, and social and physical spaces in Suva, is the main campus of the University of the South Pacific (USP) at Laucala Bay. The importance is not just for the city and nation but also for the South Pacific region. This chapter, mostly drawn from the anniversary book to mark the 50 years of USP, outlines the foundations.¹

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The USP opened on 5 February 1968 at Laucala Bay in Suva to little fanfare in a brief ceremony that commenced at 8:45 am. This allowed just enough time for a few words from Sir Norman Alexander, the acting vice-chancellor, and Freda Gwilliam, the women's education adviser of the Overseas Development Mission. Fifteen minutes later staff were administering English tests for the university's first intake of 160 students.

1 Jacqueline Leckie (with contributors), *A university for the Pacific: 50 years of USP* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 2018), 25–51. Much of these pages have been reproduced with the permission of the University of the South Pacific's (USP) 50th Centennial Committee. Due to time constraints, I could hardly research all of the university's records and did not have access to 'active' records. The reflections of some former prominent staff that I wanted to include were vetoed in that publication – but I included memories of some of those staff within the text.

While the few speakers reflected the Pacific's colonial past, the class of '68 represented the culturally diverse future of the region's independent and emergent nations. These first students came from Fiji, American Samoa, Western Samoa, Tonga, British Solomon Islands, Cook Islands, Gilbert and Ellice Islands (subsequently Kiribati and Tuvalu), New Hebrides (later Vanuatu), Niue, Tokelau and the United States Trust Territory, and in later years would be joined by students from Nauru and New Caledonia, and students from outside the Pacific. No wonder former student and chemistry lecturer Ravi Naidu recalled that USP 'acted like a mini United Nations'² – a mix that also enhanced Suva's cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism.

The brevity and simplicity of the opening ceremony belied the complexity involved in establishing a university that would serve a widely scattered and sparse population of about 1 million in the world's largest ocean and region – the Pacific. USP was formed shortly after the visit in October 1965 by the Higher Education Mission, appointed by the British and New Zealand governments, with Australia's participation, and led by Sir Charles Morris, vice-chairman of the Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas, and former vice-chancellor of the University of Leeds. The 1966 Morris Report urged 'that steps be taken as soon as possible'³ for:

the establishment of a fully autonomous University, with headquarters at the Laucala Bay Base in Suva, Fiji, to serve the needs of the English speaking territories of the South Pacific, under the name of the University of the South Pacific.⁴

2 Ravi Naidu, 'Reflections of the grandchild of an indentured labourer: USP 1972 to 1989', in Leckie, *A university for the Pacific*, 178.

3 Ministry of Overseas Development, *Report of the Higher Education Mission to the South Pacific: Appointed by agreement between the Governments of Britain and New Zealand with the co-operation of the Government of Australia* (London: H.M.S.O., 1966), 24.

4 Colony of Fiji, Council Paper (CP) 67/13, *Report on the University of the South Pacific* (Suva: Legislative Council of Fiji, 1967), 1.



Figure 12.1: ‘The Royal New Zealand Air Force base at Laucala Bay’.
Painting by Maurice Conley, 1966, now in the USP Chancellery
Board Room.

Source: Courtesy Jacqueline Leckie.

Discussions in Fiji during the 1950s and 1960s had mooted the establishment of a central tertiary training institution in Fiji. In 1956 Fiji politician, AD Patel, poignantly summed up the need for a ‘University College of the South Pacific’, ‘to create a wise and competent indigenous leadership, essential for the solution of the problems facing the territories and the general advancement of their own communities’.⁵ No action was taken until a suitable site and buildings at Laucala Bay became available after the New Zealand Government announced in the 1960s that it was closing the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) flying boat base established there in World War II.⁶ The base’s buildings and facilities were offered for much-needed educational purposes in the region. This opportunity was seized by J Box, an Auckland District inspector of schools, who recommended that the Fiji and New Zealand governments be asked

5 Cited in Brij V Lal, *A vision for change: A. D. Patel and the politics of Fiji* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1997), 121, doi.org/10.22459/VC.11.2011.

6 Bee Dawson, *Laucala Bay: The story of the RNZAF in Fiji 1939 to 1967* (Auckland: Penguin Random House, 2017).

to donate the grounds and buildings of the base for a secondary teachers' training college. Fiji's governor took the proposals further when, on a visit to New Zealand, he conveyed regional interest in adapting the base not just for a teachers' college but also for an institution for higher education in the region. The Fijian Government agreed to provide Crown land and identified adjacent land for the university's future expansion. The Morris Report endorsed the suitability of the 78.8-hectare site, which was divided into upper, middle and lower camps. Quarters, messes and administrative buildings were located in the upper camp, while the airport hangar, the slipway, workshops and transport yard were in the lower camp, an area that extended over 7.7 hectares adjacent to the sea. The lower and middle parts of the base had been well cleared of the former dense vegetation of mangoes, guavas, wild lemon trees and *ivi* trees.⁷ The students of 1968 were probably unaware of their campus's origins during the upheaval of World War II when the New Zealand Army Corps set up a tent camp at Laucala Bay in 1941. However, the buildings and infrastructure that students and staff were to work and live in would long be a reminder that the campus was once an air force base.

Local and Global Precedents

These early murmurings for a regional university were set against the colonial context in which formal higher education in the Pacific had slowly emerged.⁸ The rich cultural and linguistic diversity of Pacific peoples was overlaid by colonial and Christian educational and administrative structures. Before World War II, tertiary education in the Pacific was generally the preserve of churches that established theological colleges to train ministers and teachers. After the war, colonial governments set up teachers' colleges, which also educated future local civil servants. Many students, usually on scholarships, followed colonial ties when they pursued tertiary education, mostly in New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom. Smaller numbers of students studied in North America, India, Pakistan, France and the Caribbean. Educational migration, within and outside islands, or trans-Pacific, was entrenched within the region's

7 USP, *A garland of achievement: University of the South Pacific 1968–1993* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1993), 69–72.

8 See Ron Crocombe, Tupeni Baba and Malama Meleisea, 'The development of higher education in the Pacific Islands', in *Pacific universities. Achievements, problems and prospects*, ed. Ron Crocombe and Malama Meleisea (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1988), 20–31.

long and rich history of mobility. Suva was a key destination, because of the concentration of tertiary institutions there. The Fiji School of Medicine, the successor of Suva Medical School founded in 1885, trained medical practitioners from throughout the Pacific, especially after the Central Medical School was established in 1928.⁹ It was renamed the Fiji School of Medicine in 1961. After the Fiji College of Agriculture was set up in 1954 it offered a three-year diploma in agriculture. The Derrick Technical Institute, operating from 1963, and its successor the Fiji Institute of Technology, specialised in vocational training. Since 1965 Suva has hosted the regional and ecumenical Pacific Theological College, which offered degree-level theological education for students from Pacific Island churches.

Two other regional universities in former British colonies predated USP.¹⁰ The most comparable model of a transnational university outside the Pacific was the University College of the West Indies, which served several small tropical island states and Belize. Founded in 1948 on Jamaica, it was affiliated with the University of London until 1962 when it attained autonomous degree-granting status. The University of East Africa, which was established as an independent college of the University of London in 1963, was designed to serve Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. It only lasted until 1970, when the independent nations demanded national universities. The demand for and provision of tertiary education markedly increased during the 1960s, regionally and globally. As new institutions expanded, greatly increased access to education was accompanied by the opening of new areas of academic inquiry. This educational revolution gave rise to, and was a consequence of, vibrant youth cultures that challenged the status quo. The demand for tertiary education also came from colonial territories and newly independent nations as they faced a complex array of developmental, social and political issues. The presence of USP in Suva undoubtedly facilitated the emergence of an urban youth culture in Suva from the late-1960s until the first coup d'état there in May 1987.

9 Margaret W Guthrie, *Misi Utu: Dr D. W. Hoodless and the development of medical education in the South Pacific* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific with the South Pacific Social Sciences Association, 1979).

10 See V Lynn Meek and David R Jones, 'Particularism, universality, and the university', in Crocombe and Meleisea, *Pacific universities*, 13–17.

The Need for a University in and of the Pacific

Before the decision was made to establish a regional university based in Suva, only a small and largely male elite of indigenous Pacific Islanders gained tertiary and secondary educational qualifications. Developing Pacific countries, whether independent, newly independent, self-governing or still under colonial rule needed local people as educated and skilled workers, professionals and leaders. The demand for teachers to educate growing island populations was greater than ever, as was the need for educational curricula and resources suited to the region's cultures and future. The Morris Report identified that the provision for education and training of non-graduate post-primary teachers was the most serious deficiency within the region's 'scant' post-secondary educational facilities and so recommended the establishment of an Institute of Education as a priority for the new university. At the same time there was an increasing demand for higher education and skilled personnel to staff the expanding public service and replace former colonial administrators. However, sending students overseas for training was costly and it was doubtful whether newly independent nations could sustain this practice. External aid and subsidies for Pacific students were not guaranteed and the willingness or ability of metropolitan counties to admit large numbers of foreign students in the future was in doubt. The relevance of an overseas education to university students from the Pacific Islands and the needs of the region were pressing reasons for establishing the university in Suva. A locally based university was a means to counteract the 'brain drain' of educated personnel from emergent Pacific nations and to address local development issues.

Only a month after the Morris Report, the Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas appointed Alexander to draw up a blueprint for the proposed university. He bluntly spelled out the dual dilemma faced by new universities in developing countries:

It is the function of a university to produce a group with a foot in each camp – rooted in their own society and learned in modern developments and modern ways of thinking.¹¹

11 CP 67/3, 4.

The distinctive principles that set the planned University of the South Pacific apart from other colonial precedents were to be its regional character and structure, and complete autonomy as a university. The Morris Report recommended that courses should be designed to embrace the interests and aptitudes of local students, as well as the circumstances and needs of participant countries. These regional goals were to be shaped by infrastructure that took learning into the region and did not just bring students to Suva. The university's commitment to extension or distance education was firmly laid down in the Morris Report:

The University should have an Extra-mural Department to enable it to carry university studies to towns and villages through the Region, and to promote understanding of and affection for the University in the people of distant areas.¹²

Alexander added that the 'the greatest return' for the planned university would come from raising the general standard of village life and changing its pattern. He had been impressed with the success of the Community Training Centre in Suva and the extramural Social Training Centre at the University of the West Indies. Alexander added a third foundational principle to that of regionalism and autonomy: the new university must be prepared to be unorthodox:

There is perhaps no parallel to the proposed university – one university serving a number of territories under a number of Governments of widely differing pattern; and certainly no single university which caters for such an enormous area. Special problems will require special measures, and precedents from more developed countries simply will not apply.¹³

The founding goal that the university should be an agency for social and economic development, and 'provide services that no other organisation is able to do' was closely followed during the following 50 years. This Pacific university had to work more closely with government departments than was usual in developed countries. In practice, USP's contribution to the region would be to work with non-governmental organisations and international organisations and experts. The planners stressed research in addition to education and training; the Morris Report identified

12 Ministry of Overseas Development, *Report of the Higher Education Mission*, 48.

13 CP 67/3, 5.

a 'striking need in the Region for a flourishing centre of Research' that was interdisciplinary and would attract researchers and visitors globally.¹⁴ Suva undoubtedly became a beneficiary of such international collaboration.

On 26 June 1967, Fiji's Legislative Council passed an ordinance 'for the planning, construction and establishment in Fiji of a University of the South Pacific' with the council as the executive governing body. Fiji's governor, Sir Derek Jakeway, opened the Interim Council's first meeting on 18 September 1967 with Morris appointed as chair. Alexander was acting vice-chancellor (designate) until May 1968 when New Zealander Colin Aikman assumed duties as the first vice-chancellor. Aikman held a Master of Laws from Victoria University of Wellington and a PhD from the London School of Economics. Since 1955 he had been professor of jurisprudence and constitutional law at Victoria University, and dean of the Law Faculty. Council was headed by the chancellor, who would be a regional head of state or head of government. King Taufa'ahau Tupou of Tonga was USP's first chancellor. Although based in Suva, USP was nevertheless a regional university of Pacific countries. The regional and multi-country nature of USP posed constitutional complexity in drafting foundational legislation. Following consultation with the British Ministry of Overseas Development, the Privy Council, regional governments and university staff, the Interim Council, chaired by Morris, requested a royal charter. Queen Elizabeth II approved the charter on 4 February 1970. The Queen presented the charter to Masiofa Fetauimalemau Mata'afa of Western Samoa, USP's first pro-chancellor, at a grand ceremony in the former RNZAF hangar at Laucala Bay on 5 March 1970. Mata'afa proudly declared that 'they were standing at the threshold of a new era of educational achievement in the South Pacific'.¹⁵

Structure

The Morris Report's recommendations had ambitiously included the Fiji School of Medicine, the Pacific Theological College, the Derrick Technical Institute and the Fiji School of Agriculture within the university's Suva reach. Alexander rejected a theology department because the new university would specialise in economic development

14 Ministry of Overseas Development, *Report of the Higher Education Mission*, 27.

15 Newspaper clipping, undated, USP Pacific Collection, USP Library.

and had to recognise the ‘special circumstances of Fiji’ (presumably the non-Christian population). It was proposed that the medical school and technical institute would be autonomous institutes within the university, along with an Institute of Agriculture that embraced the Fiji School of Agriculture and the Agriculture College at Alafua in Western Samoa, and an Institute of Education and Extra-Mural Studies. Institutes were to focus on development training and applied research. While institutes were initiated during the following decade, the technical institute was not incorporated. Although later reports recommended that the medical school be transferred to USP, this was never fully realised. During the 1980s and 1990s medical and dental students took some science courses at the university and some medical degrees were awarded by USP, but most teaching was done separately at the Fiji School of Medicine.

Four months after the university opened, the British Ministry of Overseas Development and the Carnegie Corporation funded a Programme Planning Seminar, during which regional and international academics thrashed out the guidelines for the university’s academic structure. The seminar proposed schools, rather than Morris and Alexander’s recommended faculties of arts and sciences, as the university’s academic foundation. Schools would expose students to the interdisciplinary studies that were considered the best fit for the needs and context of the South Pacific. Schools lasted until 2006 when they were replaced by faculties.

Morris and Alexander identified one of the most urgent needs in the Pacific as the provision of local facilities for training secondary and intermediate schoolteachers. This goal became the responsibility of the School of Education (SOE), which had a leading role in regional educational development as countries moved towards independence. SOE staff worked closely with education departments and teachers’ colleges in the region to set up a Diploma in Education, and a bachelor’s degree in arts or science (BA/BSc) with a Graduate Certificate in Teaching. In-service courses for teachers were also important. In 1975 a two-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) was introduced so that university diplomates and qualified primary teachers could gain professional educational tertiary qualifications. Professor Reginald Honeybone, formerly at University College, Dar es Salaam, was SOE’s first head of school.¹⁶ Among the 12 academic staff initially appointed in education, English and mathematics

16 See Srinivasiah Muralidhar, ‘School of Humanities’, in USP, *A garland of achievement*, 37–39.

was New Zealander Frank Brosnahan, professor of English language. He served as deputy vice-chancellor (1972–1979) and interim vice-chancellor (1982–1983). Jo Nacola and Satendra Nandan were the only regional academics in the school. Nacola wrote one of USP's first plays, 'I Native No More', while Nandan became a widely acclaimed poet and author. SOE provided many educational and creative roles during the following 50 years. In 1969 with the support of regional governments, through the United Nations Development Programme/UNESCO Regional Project for Curriculum Development, SOE was charged with developing new courses and curricula that would be relevant to the region and its new nations. As a student in 1971 pointed out: 'When I graduated from secondary school I knew more about England than I did about Fiji.'¹⁷ SOE took a leading role in the region with innovative and applied educational research. The creativity and Pacific focus in music, drama and creative writing fostered by SOE spilled over into performances and exhibitions that many of Suva's inhabitants enjoyed over the years.

The Programme Planning Seminar also recommended that a School of Social Development offer programs in politics, history, sociology and geography.¹⁸ Politics was not initially offered but economics was. The first head of geography was Fijian Isireli Lasaga, who went on to study for a doctorate at The Australian National University and later became a prominent Fijian civil servant. The first head of school was LV Castle, professor of economics, while Dr John Harre ran sociology. Anthony Chapelle taught preliminary history. The school had a strong emphasis on preparing students for careers in teaching and the civil service, so public administration was added to the offerings. Professor Ron Crocombe arrived in 1970 to teach Pacific studies and the discipline of politics was introduced with the appointment of Dr John Chick in 1972. The broad and interdisciplinary nature of the school (renamed the School of Social and Economic Development in 1970 and known as SSED), and the often contentious questions raised by those lecturers passionate about their subject, led to many SSED graduates entering a wide range of careers and taking on challenging leadership roles within and beyond Suva.

17 Frank Galland, 'Relevance & the U.S.P.', *NATION Newsmagazine*, September 1971, 7.

18 See Vijay Naidu, 'School of Social and Economic Development', in USP, *A garland of achievement*, 43–45.

The School of Natural Resources (SNR) started with 12 staff, with Peter Beveridge as head of biology, JWA Strachan as head of chemistry and EJ Brown as head of physics. Distinguished British botanist Professor Roy Clapham was appointed as the first head of school in 1971. Uday Raj was initially the only local science lecturer. After he obtained his doctorate he established and ran the Diploma of Tropical Fisheries Programme for many years, inspiring many students to channel their love of the ocean into postgraduate research. Staff concentrated on training graduates to meet the developing needs of countries in the region, especially the utilisation of natural resources in agriculture, forestry, marine biology and geology, the development of science in secondary schools, and for research and technical positions within the public sector.

The site at Laucala Bay was ideally suited to SNR's emphasis on applied science and marine studies. The former air force hangar was a distinctive feature of USP's early years and is still remembered by former science students and staff. Stephen Willatt, head of the School of Pure and Applied Sciences, has provided a vivid recollection:

It was a massive structure visible from Kadavu Passage miles to the south. Not surprisingly, the more adventurous SNR anglers used it as a navigational aid during deep-sea fishing expeditions! The hangar was shared by SNR (occupying the northern offices) and two Fiji Government Departments, viz. the Road Transport Control Authority (occupying the southern offices) and Customs. Screeching brakes and loud horns emanating from the non-academic side of the hangar were constant occupational hazards for staff. The Customs Department used the central part of the hangar floor for storing impounded merchandise and holding regular auctions. SNR staff found the auctions a respite from their work. Staff time used to be enlivened at times by various sea-plane services which took off from the ramp nearby. Staff did not mind the noise as it was all very interesting and often lectures stopped and staff and students watched to see if the sea-plane managed to clear the breakwater!

Lectures used to be held in small dilapidated wooden buildings. The Canadian-funded Diploma in Tropical Fisheries programme was conducted in a poorly ventilated building unfit for human occupation. USP must have been on good terms with the Suva City Council for the building was never condemned! ... The biology laboratory was accommodated in reasonably sturdy structures. The physics laboratory, the former RNZAF radar workshop,

had a panoramic view of Laucala Bay. The chemists were rather unfortunate: they had to make do with a derelict RNZAF building as a laboratory. It was a wooden structure with gaping floorboards on piles. Both students and cleaners found the cracks convenient to get rid of broken glassware and instruments. Below the floor was a pond, the shores of which provided the biologists with a guaranteed supply of prothalli for their practical lessons.¹⁹

In 1996 the hangar was demolished. Two years later USP's world-class marine studies complex opened on the lower campus at Laucala, the same year as the United Nations International Year of the Ocean.

Another former RNZAF building that had several iterations was the officers' mess. Initially it housed USP's library with Mrs Kirwan as the interim university librarian. After the library was relocated to a new purpose-built building in 1972, under USP's first librarian, Harold Holdsworth (lauded by USP Vice-Chancellor Colin Aikman as 'the Doyen of Commonwealth Librarians'),²⁰ the Institute of Pacific Studies (IPS) was set up in the old wooden building in 1976. IPS was eventually replaced by the Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies.²¹

The Students

As USP's pioneering students departed from their homes on an adventure of discovery they were full of trepidation and excitement. Jean Pierre-Nirua (in 2020, minister for education in Vanuatu), who started university studies in 1981, recalled that they were trailblazers; usually the first in their communities to embark upon tertiary, often even secondary education.²² These students, who were picked to become the region's future teachers, administrators and leaders, carried huge expectations from their families, communities and the new nations they represented. A female student told Frank Galland in 1971 that coming to university in Suva 'is the most important thing that ever happened in my life; my family could never have sent me overseas to college'.²³ Added to such expectations was the bittersweet pain of leaving home and tasting new

19 Stephen Willatt, 'School of Pure and Applied Sciences', in USP, *A garland of achievement*, 40–41.

20 Colin M Aikman, 'Establishment: 1968–74', in Crocombe and Meleisea, *Pacific universities*, 50.

21 See Leckie, *A university for the Pacific*, 114–18.

22 Interview with Jacqueline Leckie, 23 August 2017.

23 Galland, 'Relevance & the U.S.P.', 7.

freedoms. Although some students had already separated from their families when they attended boarding school, the huge move to Suva was a decisive break from kin, culture and familiar physical environments. Even for Suva-ites, the change from school to university, and living off-campus with immediate family commitments could be challenging. But Padma Narsey Lal found being a science student at USP had its liberating moments:

I was doing soil biology. Soil biology meant that we would go out into different field sites and open pits to look at the layers and so on. Anyways, for me to get out, USP gave me a perfect opportunity to defy all the rules where all the Gujaratis were concerned, like wear jeans.

After the fieldtrip Lal would stay in her dirty jeans, be dropped off downtown and walk up the hill to Toorak:

I would deliberately walk all the way up in my muddy jeans and, oh it was fun. So ... there was always this talk talk. It gave the opportunity to perhaps defy some of those things.²⁴

But Ethel Sigimanu from Solomon Islands, who arrived at USP over a decade after Lal, recalled feeling shy, embarrassed, awkward and lonely. She was acutely aware of the disparities between students from different economic and cultural backgrounds. Some students wore Western-style clothing and makeup, but many of those who desired to follow this trend lacked the money to do so. Sigimanu was overwhelmed by the consumer choice available in Suva although little was available to her and other students on very limited allowances. She had been schooled in English, but like many students she was conscious of her 'grammar and quite intimidated by the fact that others could speak really fluently'.²⁵ Her lack of work experience, compared to some students who had been working as civil servants, also alarmed her. 'I moved straight from school and I was green.' Yet like so many students at USP, Sigimanu established new friendships that later merged into regional networks and were significant in her professional career. USP also set her up with the confidence to embark upon an impressive career in the public service. In 2018 she was the permanent secretary of justice and legal affairs in Solomon Islands. As fellow Solomon Islands alumnus Sir Francis Billy Hilly, who came

²⁴ Interview with Jacqueline Leckie, 21 August 2017.

²⁵ Interview with Jacqueline Leckie, 31 August 2017.

to Suva in 1968, remarked: 'USP sets you up for life – with a basic foundation trying to understand more of what life is and basically what you need to be doing.'²⁶ Hilly was the first student from the Solomon Islands to graduate with a BA in 1973 and became a leading civil servant, and politician, including periods as prime minister and leader of the opposition in Solomon Islands.

Living together with peers from different parts of the region could be a big factor in the transition from being shy or 'green' about worldly matters to developing a more confident and wider regional perspective. In 1969 there were two halls of residence, divided according to gender. When the university opened, only 20 per cent of students were female. The women's hall of residence, which could accommodate 60, was located towards the southern end of the campus. Two students shared a room. They were encouraged to discuss personal or study problems with the female tutors who lived at the residence. They could also talk to Merran Harris, mistress of the Women's Hall and one of the only three women among the 40 academic and senior professional staff at USP in 1969. The men's hall of residence was situated on the hill overlooking the main office block and could house 132 students. Male students had more confined conditions than females did, usually with four to a room. When future Pacific historian Brij Lal lived in First Hall in 1971, he shared a cubicle, which was divided by 'curtain walls', with three other students from Rotuma, Solomon Islands and Tonga:

I came from a very rural isolated family and went to Labasa Secondary and then it was essentially Indo-Fijian. I had never met a Pacific Islander. And one of the great things about USP in that first year was that ... students interacted with each other ... I think that broadened my cultural horizon.²⁷

By 1970 there was an urgent need for accommodation as approximately 300 students, or two-thirds of the student population, were living on campus. The following year British aid financed the building of two, four-storey 'student villages'. The *University News* of March 1970 reported that the architects had consulted with students and staff to 'break new ground in the design, economics and planning of buildings in the South Pacific as befits the first buildings of a new, Regional university'. The building faced directly into the trade winds, with features that allowed cross ventilation.

26 Interview with Jacqueline Leckie, 1 September 2017.

27 Interview with Jacqueline Leckie, 21 August 2017.



Figure 12.2: Women's Hall, USP, 1968.

Source: Courtesy USP.

Even the dining hall facilitated intermingling between students from different cultures. For many years menus and seating arrangements were divided into the 'Islander' and 'Indian' sections. Island food tended to be *dalo* (taro), cassava, fish, lolo, pork or beef, while Indian selections might comprise dhal, rice, roti, chicken, fish or vegetarian curry. Brij Lal recalls: 'You went straight inside, you went to the Indian side and they went to their side and there was hardly any interaction in the dining hall.' Even more striking was the lack of contact between male and female, especially for those of Indian heritage: 'Boys and girls did not sit together. They would know each other but there would be no social interaction.' These rigid barriers quietly changed and students from later years recall the dining hall as conducive to breaking down cultural barriers, a site where young romance sometimes bloomed, or where heated exchanges about student politics erupted. One issue that did unite students from different backgrounds was the quality of the food. Francis Saemala led a strike in 1969 when students stopped attending class and organised protests, even outside Suva's police station. The complaints were about the quality of food provided to students, a recurring theme at USP.



Figure 12.3: USP students demonstrating in downtown Suva against French nuclear testing in the Pacific, 1972.

Source: Courtesy Fiji National Archives, # M8350.

Suva residents also became aware of and were sometimes drawn into student protests and less vocal forms of activism until this was inhibited by the 1987 coups. During its early decades USP was a hotbed of radicalism. Students and staff were pivotal in the Pacific antinuclear, anticolonialism, environmental and women's rights movements. Even the vice-chancellor, James Maraj, gave support when he opened the first South Pacific International Conference of Students for a Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific on 14 December 1981 at Laucala campus. Students also protested about issues outside the region. When Sir Denis Blundell and Lady Blundell visited the Laucala campus in August 1976 they were greeted by angry students protesting not only about nuclear testing but also a proposed New Zealand rugby tour of South Africa, and the New Zealand Government's racist attitudes towards visitors from the Pacific.

Former student and chemistry lecturer Anirudh Singh vividly describes how USP and student life was a conduit through which global youth culture and politics was brought to the streets of Suva:

1969 was the year of Woodstock, the iconic music event symbolizing the new hippy movement. A wave of flower power and student radicalism was sweeping around the globe. And we were affected as well. We did our best to emulate our overseas

counterparts. We embraced the peace symbol and organized our own student protests. We were amongst the first groups in the Pacific to demonstrate against the French testing in Mururoa. Our group, called the Against Tests On Mururoa (ATOM) Committee, led by biology lecturer Graham Baines, organized a rally in the new Civic Auditorium, and a banner-carrying, placard-waving march to Sukuna Park.²⁸

Vijay Naidu, another early student and later professor of development studies at USP, has also outlined the networks between USP students and staff and civil society groups in Suva:

In Fiji, trade unionists, USP staff and students, civil society organisations such as the YWCA and the Fiji Council of Churches, and concerned citizens formed the Fiji Anti-Nuclear Group (FANG) to continue the fight against the tests and to oppose the shipment of radioactive materials, and the movement of nuclear powered and nuclear weapons carrying ships in Oceania. Several protests were held in Suva when suspected nuclear armed and powered vessels visited the city's port. In 1980, in a significant protest in Suva, USP staff and students and anti-nuclear activists occupied the French Embassy office and held a sit-in. The university was also the site of debates and conferences about Pacific futures, the ending of colonial rule and what kind of development trajectories that emerging independent Pacific states should take.²⁹

The influx of students into Suva greatly enriched the city in other ways such as in the growth of the city's popular culture and nightlife. Fiji's first outdoor rock music festival at Laucala Bay in 1971 included gigs by students, Neal Engledow and Ata Mai'a'i, with Mai'a'i's band 'Mode of Existence'.³⁰ Local sporting bodies in Suva also benefited from new sporting talent. Nirua had been a New Hebrides' volleyball representative but in Suva, like many of his wantoks from there and Solomon Islands, he switched to competitive soccer, and played for the USP, Suva and Nasinu teams. Students also regularly took part in community projects in Fiji, sometimes in structured activities between semesters, other times

28 Anirudh Singh, 'Two generations of change', in Leckie, *A university for the Pacific*, 198. See also Steven Ratuva, 'Those naughty student days', in Leckie, *A university for the Pacific*, 193–95.

29 Vijay Naidu, 'USP's Laucala campus as a centre of activism', in Leckie, *A university for the Pacific*, 184.

30 'Ata Mai'a'i leads "Mode of Existence"', *UNISPAC* 4, no. 4 (1971): 27, USP Pacific Collection, USP Library.

as fieldwork within their courses. This work ranged from working with disabled groups in Suva to village rural development such as building sea walls or installing water tanks.

From Air Force Base to a Regional University

This chapter has outlined the origins and some of the features of USP at Laucala Bay in the early years. During the following decades the campus was greatly transformed in terms of the infrastructure, physical landscape, student composition and the number and range of course offerings and degree programs. Student numbers burgeoned from an initial 154 to around 30,000 in 2017 (for all of USP, not just at Laucala Bay). The changing gender patterns among students was also striking; females slowly increased from 20 per cent of students in 1968 to 51 per cent in 2001, to reach 57 per cent in 2018. Although by then a far greater proportion of students lived off-campus (both within and outside Suva) than in USP's earlier years, there were far more student hostels at Laucala Bay than the two halls that had housed many of the first students.

Several of the new buildings established during USP's early years were repurposed. For example, in 1991, University Extension Services relocated to the former library building that was renamed the Communications Building as it also housed Media and Computing Services. The library had moved in 1988 into a striking new building, funded by Australia, that University Librarian Esther Batiri Williams said, 'changed the face of the "old" campus'.³¹ Other substantial new buildings included the School of Natural Resources, opened by Pierre Trudeau on 8 October 1981 because Canada funded it. Australian aid also provided for the new SSED building opened in 1981, while British aid enabled a new administration complex to open in 1983. The most imposing building complex on USP's Laucala campus is the Japan Pacific ICT Centre with technical and computer facilities. The centre's large multipurpose theatre was opened by Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, and Japanese Ambassador to Fiji Yutaka Yoshizawa, on 22 February 2012.

31 Esther Batiri Williams, 'The library', in Leckie, *A university for the Pacific*, 54–55.



Figure 12.4: Extension Services, 1977. USP at Suva was a global pioneer in the development of distance education long before digital platforms.

Source: Courtesy USP.

But perhaps the most visible change at Laucala Bay has been the landscape. While many vestiges of the buildings and roads left by the RNZAF remain – including the popular swimming pool – since the 1980s, the campus has been filled with verdant vegetation and neatly maintained grounds.³² During the 1980s, Ian Banner, director of buildings and grounds, brought a fresh vision to the look of the campus. He advocated that a tropical campus should reflect the wealth of its floral and cultural biodiversity. Edible fruit trees and plants were planted, many around staff and student housing. Saula Vodonaivalu, the curator of the South Pacific Regional Herbarium, planted several Fijian indigenous trees throughout the campus. On 14 September 1988, Fiji's president, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, opened a magnificent and lush botanical garden in a valley near the entrance to the Laucala campus. Visually striking artworks have also been installed on campus, especially after the opening of the Oceanic Centre of Arts and Culture in 1997. The centre was part of Professor Epeli Hau'ofa's vision to revitalise indigenous and local art. On USP's 25th anniversary in 1993,

32 See Randolph R Thaman with Michael P Gregory and Shingo Takeda, *Trees of life: A guide to trees and shrubs of the University of the South Pacific* (Suva: The University of the South Pacific Press, 2012).

he wrote that the Laucala campus had become like a beautiful intellectual cemetery: devoid of creativity and critical thought after the coups and the subsequent encroachment of neoliberalism into the university.³³

This chapter began with USP's modest opening ceremony at Laucala Bay in 1968. On 2 December 1971 a far grander ceremony, with 2,000 supporters, took place in the former RNZAF hangar. The national anthems of Great Britain and Tonga were played but the stand out music was the university song 'Garland of Achievement', composed by Tiresa Malietoa. Forty-nine graduates received their degrees or diplomas from the chancellor, King Taufa'ahau. The king was resplendent in his specially designed academic robes with tapa facings representing USP's member countries and Pacific identity. This occasion proudly demonstrated that USP had taken root and was there to stay. Although during the following 50 years Laucala Bay remained at the centre of USP's activities, the university expanded elsewhere in Fiji and throughout the region. In 2018 there were 14 campuses in 12 countries with a further 11 centres. This is an astonishing coverage of tertiary educational provision for the Pacific. Suva has played a major role in the growth of national and regional tertiary and secondary education and research and training through the university that took root in Laucala Bay.

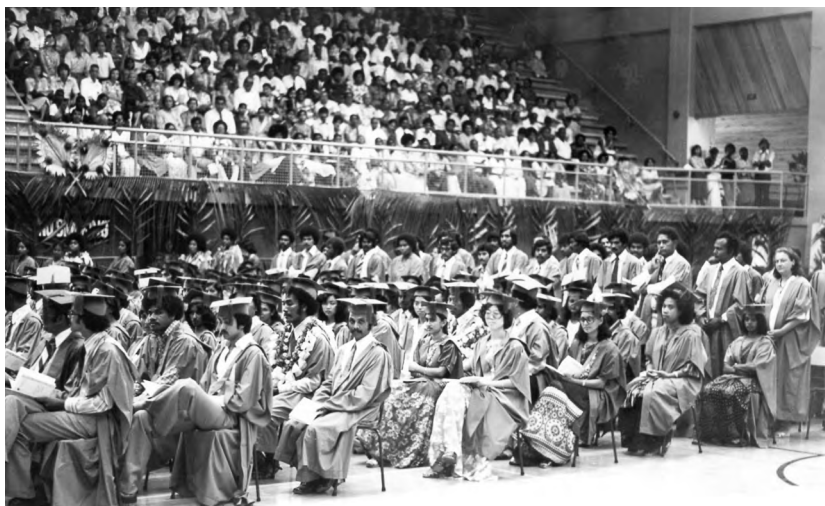


Figure 12.5: Graduation at the Lower Campus (that was also the gymnasium), 1979.

Source: Courtesy USP.

33 Epeli Hau'ofa, 'A beautiful cemetery', in USP, *A garland of achievement*, 81–82.

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