Reforming Secondary Education in Fiji

Helen Tavola

The secondary school system in Fiji has not seen substantial structural changes in the past three decades. While almost all areas of curriculum have changed to fit better with the context of Fiji, and all of the external examinations are now localised, it is still an academic system that is driven by examinations.

One of the recurring themes of the many submissions to the Fiji Islands Education Commission was concern about and dissatisfaction with both the curriculum and examinations. The curriculum was commonly seen to be too narrow and academic, and not a satisfactory preparation for life after school – employment, self-employment or tertiary education. The examination system at the secondary level, which currently has external examinations at Years 10, 12 and 13, was seen to have a stranglehold on the system. This forces teachers to adhere so closely to the set curricula that there is little room for flexibility or creativity.

The 2000 review of the education system could take one of two paths in its recommendations: to tamper with the existing system in what could be called an incremental approach, or to propose radical innovations that would lead to qualitative improvements. The latter path was chosen, as the world has changed and Fiji needs to adapt and embrace a contemporary educational approach/strategy.

The proposed reforms are based on a philosophy of liberal education; a broad-based education that teaches skills for life. The acquisition of knowledge is no longer viewed as the sole requisite outcome of education. ‘Learning to do’ and ‘learning to live together’ are recognised as vital components of teaching and learning. The challenge of education is to foster a culture of enterprise, developing in students the qualities needed for solving problems, as well as encouraging initiative, perseverance, flexibility and teamwork. Therefore, the emphasis needs to be changed to one that values all dimensions of learning; valuing process over content and understanding over factual memorisation.

There is a strong case for a broad-based curriculum. Many tertiary education providers, including the Fiji School of Medicine, Fiji Institute of Technology, the University of the South Pacific, as well as many employer groups, submitted strongly to the Education Commission for secondary students to have a broad-based school education. By integrating vocational and technical subjects into the mainstream, their current status as subjects for second-class education is avoided.

There is widespread support for students to specialise late in their secondary education, rather than early. Many careers do not require specialisation. Primary school teachers, for example, are generalists and would be much better equipped having studied a wide range of subjects.

The Proposed Model of Reform

Secondary education in Fiji follows eight years of primary education. For simplicity, a renaming of school years is proposed, with secondary schooling starting at Year 9, until completion at Year 13. The secondary years are divided into Years 9 to 11, when students work towards the Fiji School Certificate, and years 12 and 13, where the goal is the Fiji Higher School Certificate.

Rather than taking courses lasting one or two years in a small number of subjects, as they do now, students will study more subjects in the form of modules. Each module is of one semester duration and will be assessed on completion. (The school year is divided into two semesters.) This means that there will

---

1 These are two of the four pillars of education in *Learning: the Treasure Within*, also referred to as the Delors Report.
no longer be ‘exam years’ – every semester will matter equally.

The Fiji School Certificate (FSC)

Each student takes seven modules per semester. Only English and Mathematics are compulsory throughout but, each semester, students should take at least one subject from certain groups: sciences, social sciences and humanities, technical and creative subjects. The amount of free choice could be increased over the three years, depending partly on the capacity of individual schools. Students should be excited about making choices as they can study what they enjoy. Life is about making choices and such a structure prepares students for this. On the other hand, because it is broad-based, it does not cut off options. After Year 11, students can specialise.

Subjects for Years 9 to 11 can include a wide variety such as: agricultural sciences, art, business education, civics (including human rights), environmental science, Fijian language and culture, geography, Hindi language and culture, history, information technology, marine studies, mathematics, moral education, multi-cultural studies, music, Pacific studies, physical education, sciences (integrated or separate), technology, and other languages (such as Rotuman, Chinese, Telegu, Tamil, Gilbertese).

The possibilities are enormous for creating a broad curriculum, which would give all students a real chance to learn. At the end of each semester, each module is assessed, both by school-based assessment and externally set examinations. Ideally, the school-based component of the assessment will be 50%, but it may start at a lower proportion. In the three years, students will have completed 42 modules. Each module will have been awarded a grade from A to E and each grade carries a numerical value. (For example, A = 5; B = 4; C = 3; D = 2; E = 1). A numerical total based on these grades will give entrance to Year 12. A student who has an average C grade will have 126 out of a possible 210, which could be the entry point to Year 12.

While each student has many examinations to contend with, each one is short and there is less at stake than with the ‘make or break’ examinations in the present system.

Another advantage of this proposal is that the students who do not complete these three years leading up to FSC could be given a report form with the results of the assessment of modules they completed before leaving school so that, although such students leave school early, they will still have some credentials. (In the present system of two-year cycles, if a student leaves school without completing the cycle, s/he has nothing to show for it in terms of certification.) The school-based assessment component gives scope for project work, which develops initiative and creativity and teaches children how to apply knowledge. Developing a school newspaper, producing plays, producing food, running a school business enterprise, carrying out environmental projects such as replanting mangroves, researching local knowledge on various subjects, conducting surveys, compiling results and writing reports – these are all possibilities that could excite and challenge students.

Fiji Higher School Certificate (FHSC)

At this level, there should be no compulsory subjects. Students take only five modules per semester, as they are more specialised than at FSC level. Years 12 and 13 can be open to students who aim to continue with tertiary education as well as those who do not. Students can leave the system after one year, or indeed at any time, and still be credited with modules completed.

Points for modules can be gained, as at FSC level, and tertiary institutions can set their own requirements regarding points and pre-requisite subjects. With five modules per semester, students have a potential total of 20 modules over two years. The maximum numerical total over this period would be 100. When students apply for tertiary courses during their final semester, they would already have the grades from three semesters, a
profile which would provide a sound basis for provisional selection.

In addition to subjects listed for FSC, students could take modules in areas such as: creative writing (in different languages), tourism studies, a wide range of technical and vocational subjects, media studies and peace studies. There are possibilities for some courses franchised from tertiary institutions such as the Fiji Institute of Technology to be included in senior school programmes.

There should be curriculum working-groups for all subjects, with a wide range of input, such as from tertiary institutions and non-governmental organisations. USP staff should be actively involved both in setting curricula and in assessment; they can share their expertise and the university can make sure that pre-requisites for its courses are met at the secondary level.

At the Year 12 and Year 13 level, there could be provision for gaining credit of a different kind for doing community service. Students could help in children’s homes, old people’s homes, or work with NGOs such as the Red Cross or St John Ambulance. Those who are contemplating a career in the medical field may be able to do some menial work in hospitals, which would give them a taste of work in that domain.

If school time is allocated for community work, as is the practice in some countries, some students could assist in nearby primary schools, thus gaining an insight into the teaching profession. Helping with lower year-groups in secondary schools is another option. There is huge scope for environmental work in the community and, with some imagination, many students could be engaged in this field.

There are many benefits to be gained from such a scheme, including bridging the gap between school and community. Community service also helps to shape young people by providing opportunities for them to develop in different areas. It can also help to boost their self-confidence and self-esteem, and provide them with a valuable bridge between school and life after school. Practical experience of this nature means that students have to solve real problems and be part of the adult world, thus learning valuable life-skills.

Schools may have to allocate a teacher to coordinate this community service, so that it is done effectively with well-maintained records, and it should form part of a student’s credentials when applying for courses or employment.

Extra-curricula activities also provide valuable learning experiences for young people. Tertiary education providers and employers commented to the Education Commission that students who had engaged in these activities were more likely to succeed. Some schools have clubs, operating mainly in lunch-breaks, for activities such as debating, drama, choir practice, chess and various sports. Evidence of participation in these should also be recorded on school reports.

**Implementation**

Obviously, such a radical change has major implications in terms of curriculum development, teacher training, assessment procedures etc. They are manageable, however, and the long-term benefits will outweigh the difficulties.

Some schools may wish to cater for Years 12 and 13 only while others may need incentives to convert to senior colleges. Smaller schools and many rural schools may need to terminate at Year 11, as they would not be able to offer the range of courses at the senior level. Students would need to transfer to a senior college, some of which would need to offer boarding facilities to cater for rural students.

There is a widely held view that the present examination system kills much innovative teaching and encourages rote learning. While the ultimate goal for the new system is at least 50% school-based assessment, initially it could be less than this. The present system of assessing one or two years’ work in two or three hours is unjust and not educationally sound. Increasing the proportion of school-based assessment will require teacher-
training, as well as increased levels of monitoring from the Ministry of Education. Monitoring will need to be stringent, regular and intensive in order to make the system effective. Ideally, education officers located in the divisional offices should do it.

Increasing proportions of school-based assessment will have an impact on pedagogy. Critical thinking and analysis will replace rote learning. Teachers should encourage project work in groups and teams. Such pedagogical practices are a real preparation for life-skills, where people live, work and make decisions in groups.

Why Change?

There are many compelling reasons to change, and few reasons to remain with the status quo. The present system is not appropriate for the 21st century. An elitist system that caters primarily for a small minority of academically gifted children does not cater for the majority who will never reach university level.

The proposed approach offers flexibility in the curriculum and links in well with rapid changes taking place in the globalised world. It allows changes to be made; a module can be modified or changed without major difficulties. At present, changing curricula is difficult and slow because the system is not flexible. One of the results is that children are using the same text-books in school that their parents used.

Allowing students to make choices resolves the problem of the over-cluttered timetable. Students gain independence when making choices, which increases motivation. Because they can take courses that they are interested in and enjoy, the problem of dropping out should be minimised. The relatively high attrition rate is a major concern of education in Fiji. This reform will help overcome the problem, as increasing numbers of young people should complete 11 or 13 years of schooling.

Repetition of a school year is another wasteful feature of the current examination-based system. Repetition is universally regarded as costly and generally ineffective. This modular system will allow for students to repeat single modules, but advance in others, thus avoiding repeating whole school years.

The accusation may be made that the curriculum will become fragmented and lacking in continuity. This need not be the case. The compulsory subjects from Years 9 to 11 will be continuous, with progressive learning, as is the case with many subjects at FSHC level. Some subjects will lend themselves to ‘stand-alone’ courses, and others will set their own pre-requisites. Students will, therefore, take a mixture of courses – some that they continue with, and others that last only one semester. This will give both breadth and depth to their studies.

The goals of the reform are to increase learning opportunities for all students. Students should be offered a range of options in a modular approach so that they can develop increased competencies and have better chances of achieving than at present. The proposed reform agenda aims to improve the quality of education in Fiji, by making it dynamic and flexible, and responsive to the needs of the rapidly changing world.

References
