



STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Review Report on the 2011 Asia-Pacific Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications



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Chairperson's Foreword

I am pleased to present the 2011 Asia-Pacific Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications.

The Standing Committee is established under Section 109 (2) (e) of the Standing Orders (SO) of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji.

The purpose of the review was to scrutinise the 2011 Asia-Pacific Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications. Parliament had referred the above Convention to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence at its sitting on 28th November 2019.

The Committee when reviewing the treaty, heard oral submissions, received written submissions as well as holding public consultations in Suva and Lautoka. Those heard and consulted included:

- Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC)
- The University of the South Pacific (USP)
- Professor Shaista Shameem
- Office of the Solicitor General
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Although invitations for submissions were directed to Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts (MEHA), Fiji National University (FNU) and University of Fiji (UOF), the Committee did not receive responses.

The emphasis on quality higher education is of growing importance given the emerging challenges from the rapid expansion of higher education systems, as well as the substantial increase in cross-border mobility of students in the past two decades, both of which are key issues in Asia and the Pacific.

Based on recent studies by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO), Institute for Statistics (UIS), the East Asia and the Pacific region influences global trends in student migration. The region supplies the most international students, representing 28% of the global total.

To support cross-border mobility of students and to ensure access to quality education, UNESCO initiated six regional conventions on the recognition of higher education qualifications, including the Asia-Pacific Regional Convention, which was first adopted in Bangkok, Thailand in 1983. To date, there are 21 State Parties to the 1983 Bangkok Convention.

In view of new developments shaping higher education such as the massification of higher education, the increasing use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and the diversification of higher education providers, the Asia-Pacific Regional Convention expedited a process that led to the adoption of a new convention in Tokyo, Japan in 2011 which is now known as the 2011 Asia-Pacific Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (Convention).

The Convention is an enabler which ensures that studies, diplomas and degrees in its member countries are recognised as widely as possible, considering the great diversity of education systems in the Asia-Pacific region and the richness of its cultural, social, political, religious and economic backgrounds.

The Committee believes that Fiji has put in place some of the requirements of the Convention. The Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC) is ready to be Fiji's National Information Centre (NIC) as required under the Tokyo Convention. The centre acts as the single point of contact for providing information on qualifications and higher education systems. The main roles of the NIC are to:

1. Provide information on the recognition of foreign diplomas, degrees and other qualifications;
2. Provide information on the education systems in foreign countries and NIC's own country; and
3. Provide information on the opportunities for studying abroad, including information on loans and scholarships and advice on mobility and equivalence.

However, the FHEC structure and resources need to be strengthened immediately to meet the requirements of the Convention:

1. Budget constraints (reduction in Government budget for the current financial year of approximately \$800,000).
2. Confirmation of leadership roles with substantive appointments.
3. Review of the Higher Education Act 2008.
4. In-service training in Education and the importance of *Train the Trainer* programs.

The Committee recommends that Fiji ratifies the 2011 Asia-Pacific Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications.

The Committee commends the contributions by stakeholders that assisted in the preparation of this report.

I take this opportunity to also thank members of my Committee for compiling this bipartisan report.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, I submit this report to the Parliament.



Hon. Alexander O'Connor
Chairperson

Acronyms

FHEC	Fiji Higher Education Commission
FQF	Fiji Qualifications Framework
NIC	National Information Centre
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SO	Standing Orders
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USP	The University of the South Pacific

Recommendations

The Committee recommends the following:

1. Fiji accedes to the Convention and adopts without reservation.
2. That Government reviews the Higher Education Act 2008.
3. That the organization be provided adequate resources to support the implementation of the Convention.
4. That leadership positions within the organization be confirmed with substantive appointments.
5. That in-service training in Education and the *Train the Trainer* programs be re-introduced.
6. That country wide consultations be carried out to analyse the Education sector, including Early Childhood education.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background and Terms of Reference

The Committee reviewed the 2011 Asia-Pacific Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in its first meeting on Tuesday 14th January 2020.

On 15th January 2020 stakeholders made submissions on the above Treaty in the Parliament precinct in Suva.

The emphasis on quality higher education is of growing importance given the emerging challenges from the rapid expansion of higher education systems, as well as the substantial increase in cross-border mobility of students in the past two decades, both of which are key issues in Asia and the Pacific.

The Report is divided into three parts:

- I. **Part One** - focuses on the Committee recommendations
- II. **Part Two** - covers the Findings of the report to Parliament
- III. **Part Three** -covers the Conclusion

1.2 Committee Remit and Composition

Pursuant to Standing Orders 109(2) (e) that the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence is mandated to look into matters related to Fiji's relations with other countries, development aid, foreign direct investment, oversight of the military and relations with multi-lateral organisation.

The members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence are as follows:

- 1.2.1 Hon. Alexander O'Connor – Chairperson
- 1.2.2 Hon. Dr. Salik Govind - Deputy Chairperson
- 1.2.3 Hon. Selai Adimaitoga – Member
- 1.2.4 Hon. Anare Jale – Member
- 1.2.5 Hon. Lenora Qereqeretabua –Alternate Member

1.3 Procedure and Program

The Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence commenced its deliberation on the 15th January 2020 and received written and oral submissions from the following stakeholders:

- Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC)
- The University of the South Pacific (USP)
- Office of the Solicitor General
- Professor Shaista Shameem

Although invitations for submissions were directed to Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts (MEHA), Fiji National University (FNU) and University of Fiji (UOF), the Committee did not receive responses.

2.0 Committee Deliberation and Analysis

2.1 Committee Findings

The Committee's findings are outlined below:

1. All submitters agreed that Fiji signs and ratifies the Convention.
2. The Convention allows all signatories to respect each other's higher education framework despite the diversity that exists in the Asia Pacific region. This goes to transferability and thus employability of our graduates in the region.
3. The Convention allows Fiji to collaboratively support better quality in higher education. This allows the up-skilling not just of the individuals but also of states to which knowledge is transferred.
4. The Convention allows standardising of assessment of qualifications and this, in turn, introduces an element of common educational understanding among the parties in terms of the criteria to be used for measurement which is non-discriminatory and therefore reliable.
5. The Accreditation of qualifications also allows parties to impose additional requirements suitable for their unique circumstances. This is important in the Fiji context. The presumption that accreditation of our qualifications elsewhere to meet certain criteria, applies across the board for all state parties to the Convention.
6. Fiji's international obligations towards refugees and internally displaced peoples is reflected in section 7 in case a qualification that is stated by a person in that position cannot be proven. Fiji has not opened her doors to refugees in any significant numbers as yet, but the principle expressed in this clause is important.
7. The right to information is covered by section 8 of the Article of the Convention and is well represented in the Fijian sense by the Fiji Higher Education Commission and the Ministry of Education which now have the relevant database and a rigorous approach to standardisation of the recording forms through their Fiji Qualifications Framework (FQF).
8. That country wide consultations be carried out to analyse the Education sector including Early Childhood education.

Benefits of Accession

1. The Convention is an enabler which ensures that studies, in its member countries are recognised as widely as possible, considering the great diversity of education systems in the Asia-Pacific region and the richness of its cultural, social, political, religious and economic backgrounds.
2. Provides a platform for recognition of qualifications with major countries in the Asia-Pacific. Recognition of qualifications would support the labour mobility of Fijians.
3. It builds the “respect and trust” with other developed countries of FHEC and Fiji’s higher education sector by proving confidence in our performance, our capability and capacity.
4. Provides greater opportunities for our Fijian students to transfer their qualifications overseas (learner mobility), but also opportunities for Fiji to increase International student opportunities; which would be an economic incentive for Fiji.
5. Increasing employment and educational opportunities for the people of Fiji within the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. This is facilitated by the recognition of studies and qualifications of both students and workers across institutions and countries.
6. Facilitating cooperation internationally and within the Asia-Pacific region for the recognition of qualifications and studies.
7. Greater international student mobility for the people of Fiji. This is facilitated by a transparent, coherent and reliable recognition procedure for higher education qualifications and even partial studies.
8. Recognition of higher education qualifications improves the effectiveness of the international student gateway to international labour markets. The remittances earned would support our country’s economic development.
9. It also aids the distribution of higher education provision, something which is highly beneficial for UNESCO Asia-Pacific Member States which lack the capacity to absorb demand for higher education.
10. In ratifying the Convention, Fiji will also be embracing Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG4), calling for all countries to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” Given its role in promoting lifelong learning, higher education was given a prominent role to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality education, including university.

11. The cross-border recognition of qualifications can be expected to raise the capability of the nation in the production of goods and services. This in turn, will grow the economy, as well as lead to increased competitiveness and productivity that will allow Fiji to better compete in global markets.
12. Facilitates greater international understanding and supports peace-building efforts regionally and globally.
13. Fiji will gain recognition on an international platform as a founding member state of the Convention.
14. The new Convention, if ratified and implemented, will help to alleviate problems including institutional weaknesses and the lack of democratic engagement will effectively contribute to the public well-being.

Impact of the Convention

Quite apart from adhering to Fiji's obligations pursuant to the SDGs, which emphasize life-long learning as well as gender-neutral access to affordable education overall, the impact of ratifying the Convention for improvement of our educational landscape will be felt immediately. As always, Fiji will be taking the leadership role by ratification and her people will be able to take advantage of jobs and qualifications in the region suitable to their career preferences.

However, there is more to ratifying the Convention and the process of compliance than merely joining the internationally benchmarked family. Importantly, the Convention provides us with a unique opportunity to Fiji to review our education system, particularly in terms of whether we meet the requirements necessary for a robust educational profile for future generations and for those who wish to pursue life-long learning as adults.

Requirements for Implementation

1. Have a formal recognition authority (FHEC) to implement the requirements under the Convention;
2. Setting up of a National Information Centre (NIC) which we now have under the FHEC;
3. Have systems and processes to assess and recognise partial and completed foreign qualifications;
4. Make all reasonable efforts to recognise qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in refugee-like situations;

Challenges

- Budget constraints
- Delay in the confirmation of senior appointments
- Retention policies to mitigate the brain drain.
- Review of the Higher Education Act 2008.

2.2 Oral and Written Evidence Received

The Committee received oral and written submissions from stakeholders and the public as listed on page 3 of this report and in *Appendix A*.

3.0 Gender Analysis

The Convention is gender neutral and therefore benefits all genders.

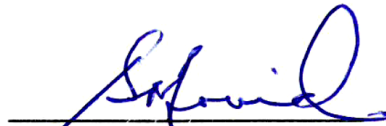
4.0 Conclusion

The Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence has fulfilled its mandate approved by Parliament which was to report on the 2011 Asia-Pacific Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications after consultations with the relevant stakeholders.

5.0 Members' Signature



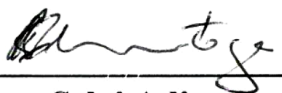
Hon. Alexander O'Connor
Chairperson



Hon. Dr. Salik Govind
Deputy Chairperson



Hon. Lenora Qereqeretabua
Alternate Member



Hon. Selai Adimaitoga
Member



Hon. Anare Jale
Member

6.0 Appendices

6.1 Appendix A

All other written and transcribed evidences gathered during the public submissions and public consultations will be made accessible on the Parliament website on:

<http://www.parliament.gov.fj/committees/standing-committee-on-foreign-affairs-and-defence/>

No	Date	Agency/Organisation	Written Evidence	Oral Evidence
1	20 th January, 2020	Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC)	✓	✓
2	23 rd January, 2020	The University of the South Pacific (USP), Professor Pal Ahluwalia	✓	✓
3		USP Student Association	✓	✓
4	27 th January, 2020	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	✓	✓
5		Office of the Solicitor General	✓	✓
6	30 th January, 2020	Professor Shaista Shammem	✓	✓