Fiji's labour market paradox

Fijian workers under PALM scheme. New figures in the Provisional Visitor Arrivals report released by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics show that 873 residents departed Fiji for employment overseas in January 2026, the author writes. Picture: FILE

By GAYLENE KAMALI

The survey data indicates that 58.4 per cent of Fiji's workforce has secondary-level education, while 25.6 per cent hold tertiary qualifications. Picture: FCEF/SUPPLIED

FIJI'S labour market presents a growing paradox.

On one hand, employers across multiple sectors continue to report labour shortages and difficulties finding suitably skilled workers.

On the other, thousands of young Fijians remain outside employment, education or training.

The recently released 2023–2024 Employment and Unemployment Survey by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics provides important insights into this challenge.

While Fiji's overall unemployment rate stands at approximately 5.7 per cent, youth unemployment remains significantly higher. Even more concerning is the number of young people classified as NEET – not in employment, education or training.

According to the survey, 23.7 per cent of young people aged 15–24 fall into this category, representing more than 29,000 young Fijians.

These are individuals who are neither gaining skills through education nor participating in the workforce.

For a country with a relatively small labour market and an economy seeking to expand and diversify, this represents a significant underutilisation of human potential.

At the same time, businesses across Fiji frequently report skills shortages.

Employers in sectors such as construction, tourism, manufacturing and technical services continue to highlight challenges in recruiting workers with the necessary experience, technical competencies or workplace readiness.

Part of the explanation lies in the mismatch between education outcomes and labour market needs.

While Fiji has made significant strides in expanding access to tertiary education, qualifications alone do not guarantee employability.

Employers increasingly emphasise the importance of practical experience, technical skills, digital literacy and problem-solving abilities - competencies that are not always fully developed within traditional academic pathways.

The survey data indicates that 58.4 per cent of Fiji's workforce has secondary-level education, while 25.6 per cent hold tertiary qualifications.

However, employers often report that graduates require additional workplace training before they can fully contribute to productivity.

Another factor shaping Fiji's labour market is migration.

Labour mobility schemes have created valuable opportunities for Fijians to access employment overseas, particularly in countries such as Australia and New Zealand.

However, this mobility also has implications for the domestic labour market.

As experienced and skilled workers depart, businesses must adjust to a smaller talent pool.

In some sectors, employers are increasingly competing for a limited number of skilled workers.

New figures in the Provisional Visitor Arrivals report released by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics show that 873 residents departed Fiji for employment in January 2026.

In July 2025, the Government announced that more than 15,000 Fijian workers were under the seasonal workers schemes in Australia and New Zealand.

In September 2025, 1133 Fijians left the country for jobs.

At the same time, Fiji has seen a rise in foreign labour permits, around 500 to 800 applications per month - particularly in industries facing acute shortages.

Education systems, training programmes and labour market policies must work better together to create clear pathways from learning to employment.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) will play an increasingly important role in addressing this challenge. Many sectors experiencing labour shortages require practical, job-ready skills rather than purely academic qualifications. Strengthening vocational pathways, apprenticeships and industry partnerships can help young people transition more effectively into the workforce.

Equally important is early exposure to the workplace. Internship programmes, structured work placements and stronger collaboration between employers and education providers can ensure that graduates enter the labour market with relevant experience and realistic expectations.

For employers, there is also an opportunity to invest more strategically in workforce development.

Training, mentorship and career progression pathways can help retain talent while building a more productive workforce over time.

At a national level, policy coordination is essential.

Labour mobility schemes, education policies and workforce planning must be considered together to ensure that Fiji is developing the skills needed for its future economy while also retaining sufficient talent at home.

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