

# Labour challenges

Supply side evidence now available



By GAYLENE KAMALI

**T**HE findings of the newly launched National Skills Gap Assessment (NSGA) Survey reinforce a concern long raised by the Fiji Commerce & Employers Federation (FCEF) — our local labour market is not working for local employers. The report identifies 95 different jobs that employers are finding difficult to fill with locals.

These positions cover a wide cross section of industries.

In addition, the qualifications required for those positions range from high school graduates, TVET graduates and academia graduates.

This is a clear indication of the breadth and depth of the challenges in Fiji's labour market.

This survey was led by FCEF in partnership with the Fiji Human Resource Institute (FHRI) and the Higher Education Commission Fiji and funded by the Ministry of Finance.

This is Fiji's first labour demand survey that has been published.

The survey was conducted by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics from November 2025 to February 2026, targeting 410 companies and received a 91 per cent response rate.

The number of employers that responded employed 33.4 per cent of the total formal sector when compared to the Employment/Unemployment Survey (2023-2024).

The survey was conducted using three reference years: December 31, 2022; December 31, 2024 and August 31, 2025.

## Key survey findings:

(a) Despite a 11 per cent growth in the workforce, there is a total of 95 different jobs that employers are finding difficult to fill with locals.

(b) When compared to the proportion of growth against local employment, the proportion of foreign workers grew by 79 per cent — indicating structural gaps in the ability of local institutions to supply local workers with the right qualifications, skills and behaviours.

(c) Since 2022, Bangladesh then India remains the largest source mar-



At the launch of the National Skills Gap Assessment Survey last week, L-R Director - Higher Education Commission Fiji Dr Eci Naisele, ILO regional director Martin Wandera, Prime Minister and Minister for National Planning & Statistics and chief guest Sitiveni Rabuka, managing director Narseys Plastics and FCEF's immediate past president Vinay Narsey, FHRI vice president Rosie Fong. Picture: FCEF/SUPPLIED

ket for foreign workers. From our region, Solomons, Papua New Guinea and Tonga make up the largest proportion of foreign workers.

(d) Employers indicated that overseas migration of labour remains the largest cause of skills drain and gaps.

(e) Employers indicated their preference to invest in local workers — upskill and re-skill current employees, re-engage retired workers and hiring locals — indicating that hiring foreign workers is not their first preference.

(f) The proportion of males in employment grew by 15 per cent, while female employment only grew by six per cent — indicating a widening gender gap.

(g) While waged earners make up the largest share of the workforce, the proportion of salaried earners increased by 16 per cent compared to eight per cent for waged earners — indicating the transition to more permanent work with greater benefits.

## Key messages:

(a) Effective labour market policies and programmes are urgently needed to address supply side challenges of the labour market. This is where the real problem lies and where effort needs to be accelerated.

The institutions that are supposed to be strengthening our labour market are not working together.

Most of the efforts of these institutions are fragmented and not coordinated. The Ministry of Employment's emphasis on overseas labour mobility has created important econom-

ic opportunities for Fiji.

However, there is also an urgent need to ensure that the domestic labour market is sufficiently supported, through stronger alignment between education outcomes and local industry workforce demands.

While many jobs remain available, 26.6 per cent of young people are not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). Many economically active Fijians are choosing not to work, due to the \$1.4b in remittance coming into the country.

About 11,000 economically active Fijians are registered with the National Employment Center (NEC) seeking foreign employment and cannot work while on the waiting list.

As a result, more than 740 companies are now bringing in foreign workers, with an estimated population of foreign workers at 8000-10,000 currently.

(b) Employers need to access 100 per cent of their one per cent FNU levy to attract and retain local workers.

Employers are investing in and prioritising local workers — recruiting foreign workers is their fourth choice.

Employers prefer to up-skill and re-skill current employees, re-engage retired workers and hire locals.

Recruiting foreign workers is costly — recruitment costs, airfares and bonds alone can amount to an average cost of \$3000 per foreign worker.

However, to invest in the skills of local workers, employers can only access 10 per cent of their one per cent FNU levy.

From 2019 to 2024, about 4800 employers contributed an av-

erage of \$25m a year but could only access an average of \$2.5m a year — that is about \$520 per contributing employer.

Employers need to access 100 per cent of their training funds, and an independent institution led by employers needs to be established to manage these funds.

This can spur more innovative schemes such as workplace exposure programs for students and teachers, high quality internship and apprenticeship schemes and inclusion of women, youth and persons with disabilities.

Cabinet recently made a decision to access a specific amount of the one per cent FNU levy for Government training. What about the private sector?

(c) Efficient and safe recruitment of foreign workers.

While supply side issues of the labour market will take time to fix and a decision needs to be made for employers to access all of their one per cent FNU levy, companies still need to continue being operational. The only option — while companies move towards digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence — is foreign labour.

Fiji is a growing labour receiving country and therefore bilateral agreements needs to be established with Bangladesh and India.

Fiji has already established the bilateral arrangements and the infrastructure to send workers to New Zealand & Australia.

The Ministry of Employment and the Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC) are heavily invested in pre-departure components of the labour mobility

program.

Therefore, having an efficient and safe infrastructure in place to hire foreign workers will ease the burden on employers.

It also means improving the efficiency of work permit processing by the Ministry of Immigration. Work permit processing can take up to six months.

While the number of infringing employers is relatively low, the majority of good employers are put through the same tedious vetting and approval process.

A system that was working, called "Qualified Employer List" negotiated by the private sector with the Ministry of Immigration has been cancelled.

Fiji Revenue & Customs Service (FRCS) has a gold card system for employers — why not use existing national system?

There are also long hanging fruits that can buffer the skills gaps.

These include allow spouses of expatriates (who are qualified) to work, allow regional students certain hours to work and allow all Fijians registered at NEC to work temporarily.

Based on the results of this first demand side survey, the Fiji Bureau of Statistics plans to conduct the National Skills Gap Assessment Survey on a regular basis.

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