

Navigating Fiji's higher education landscape with indigenous research methodologies

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Abstract

My doctoral study explored the development of the Fiji higher education sector following the 2006 coup, from 2007 to 2017, and the challenges faced by the sector during this time. The study involved interviews with government officials and higher education stakeholders, alongside analysis of key policy texts. As a Fijian researcher doing potentially sensitive research, I was acutely aware of the need to conduct the study in a way that was robust, but beneficial to Fiji and Fijians. I was also aware of my status as a Fijian (and former government employee) who was bonded to return 'home'. In this paper, I describe my study context, and the considerations that led me to draw on the Fijian Vanua Research Framework as an ethical and methodological guide for my research. I describe how I applied the Fijian Vanua Research Framework at each stage of my study, and conclude with some reflections on research, reciprocity and research ethics in politically sensitive contexts.

Keywords: Fiji, higher education, Fijian culture, cultural knowledge, methodology, Fijian Vanua Research Framework

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Introduction

Higher education is a dynamic landscape in many countries and Fiji is no exception. In my doctoral study, I¹ focused on developments and challenges in the Fiji Higher Education (HE) sector from 2007 to 2017. I chose to focus on this period since it followed the fourth coup (in 2006) and subsequent government engagement with HE development. Following the coup, HE became a priority area for Fiji's government to regulate. This was reflected in the establishment of Fiji's first HE legislation and HE regulatory body, the formation of a national university following a merger of core higher education institutions (HEIs), and the development of new HE scholarships and loans schemes. Specifically, my study explored how Fiji's HE sector changed from 2007 to 2017 and the main challenges for the sector during this time. The study drew on three data sources: research literature, interviews with HE stakeholders, and policy documents.

In line with an interpretivist paradigm, I recognise that research is also an interpretive process. My methodology outlined the methods I used to interpret my data, using the Vanua Research Framework as a way of describing and understanding these. Since my research was conducted in, and for Fiji, I drew on a Fijian research framework to guide my ethical and methodological approach – the Fijian Vanua Research Framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). The Fijian Vanua Framework provided culturally appropriate guidance for my research practice, particularly given that questions such as those pertaining to education and politics remain potentially sensitive in Fiji. The Fijian Vanua Framework offered a framework for conducting research in a way that is respectful of, and valuable for Fiji, and it provided me with both a guide and a rationale for managing the tension between attention to political sensitivities and representing research data truthfully. In exploring the research questions above, my aim was to contribute both to HE policy in Fiji and to the literature on HE and Pacific development.

Study Context

Fiji is an archipelago in the South Pacific region. It comprises 300-500 islands, 110 of which are inhabited. In 2017, Fiji's census recorded the population at a total of 889,327 people (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Fiji society reflects a mosaic of ethnicities, customs, languages, cuisines and belief systems. Fijian(s), is the term used to refer to all Fiji citizens. In 2013, the Fiji government released a new constitution which stated that all ethnicities in Fiji (who were Fiji citizens) should be referred to as 'Fijians'; and that they are united by common and equal citizenship (Government of the Republic of Fiji, 2013:1). However, for the purpose of this paper, I use the term Fijian(s) to refer to both Fijian citizens and indigenous Fijian practices. Further, the term *iTaukei* refers to Fiji's major ethnic group — the indigenous people of Fiji, and Indo-Fijian refers to Fiji's second-largest ethnic group, that is, Fijians of Indian descent. The *iTaukei* culture implicitly and explicitly guides how some of the country's institutions or professional spaces operate (Hall, 2019). Specifically, for *iTaukeis*, the land (*vanua*) provides a powerful sense of identity, and activities in the *vanua* are conducted hierarchically

¹ 'I' refers to the doctoral student. The second author is the research supervisor. Although this paper has two authors, we write it from the student's perspective.

through Vanua (tribes), Yavusa (clans) and Mataqali (sub-clans), although with a great emphasis on communality (Lawson & Lawson, 2015). The Fijian Vanua Framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008) provides a guide for following the rules of vanua to gather and use data in a culturally appropriate manner. I explain this further below.

Fiji's political journey can be understood in terms of three stages: traditional leadership, colonisation, and post-colonisation. Before colonisation, traditional leadership dominated politics, nationally and regionally. Under traditional leadership, as Lawson and Lawson (2015) and Ravuvu (1983:14) explain, chiefs receive their authority through local traditions, for example, ancient tribal wars won or lost determine hierarchy between clans. Also, within their communities, "chieftainship is ... incorporated within the vanua (land)" (Lawson and Lawson, 2015:1). An interrelationship between the leadership of the chiefs and the vanua (with villagers) creates "the Fijian way of life" (vakavanua), or the way the village/place operates (Lawson & Lawson, 2015). The vakavanua has a strong association with the vakaturaga—"the way of the chiefs", which determines the direction of traditional politics (Lawson & Lawson, 2015:1).

During colonisation (1874–1970, a period of 96 years), leadership was shared to some extent between the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) — the apex body of the Fijian colonial administration — and the British colonial governor, Sir Arthur Gordon (Lawson & Lawson, 2015). Sir Arthur Gordon hosted meetings (early in the 1900s) that included the GCC, providing the chiefs with an avenue for discussions, which reorganised into a formal advisory body. This partnership led to the establishment of a legislative council in Fiji. The GCC's involvement in these annual forums allowed them to shape legislation affecting Fiji's interests, and also assisted in Fiji's transition after independence (Lawson & Lawson, 2015). During colonisation, the GCC groomed the future chiefs and successor figures who would later occupy high office posts in both the colonial and post-colonial regimes, for example Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Ratu Sir George Cakobau (Ratuva, 2011).

Post-colonisation or independence came in 1970; however, since 1987, there have been four coups in Fiji. The obvious issues underlying these coups relate to leadership and ethnicity. Specifically, prior to the coups, there was public scepticism about iTaukei leadership in government, and tensions remained from the colonial period when iTaukeis perceived Indo-Fijians as a threat to political control (Ratuva, 2011). However, in the period between coups, a lack of consensus about the best type of leadership and questions around legitimacy highlighted a need for stable leadership in Fiji.

Fiji's most recent coup in 2006, led to the establishment of an interim government until democratic elections could be held in 2014. The general elections were won by the FijiFirst Party, with the election outcomes indicating the people's desire for stability. High voter enrolment reflected people's hopes for accountability and transparency (Madraiwiwi, 2015). The appointment of the interim government after the 2006 coup was the prelude to my study period (2007-2017).

HE is crucial for cultivating human resources in Fiji and the Pacific to meet development needs and accelerate economic growth (Crocombe, Baba, & Meleisea, 1988; Nabobo, 1996). Published literature on Fiji HE considers global and regional development in relation to Fiji and the Pacific (Baba, 1997;

Chandra, 2009, 2011; Crocombe et al., 1988); the development of education and HE policies in Fiji (Chandra, 2009; Jacob & Xiong, 2016; Tuinamuana, 2005); ICT education, usage and development (Kala, 2013; A. Kumar & Mohite, 2017; S. Kumar & Daniel, 2016); graduate development and economic advancement (Lingam & Lingam, 2014; Naidu, Mohanty, & Sudhakar, 2014; Tagicakiverata, 2012); teachers' capacity development (Lingam & Lingam, 2014; Sharma, 1997); linkages between HE, primary and secondary education (Veramu, 2014); HEI programmes and transnational qualifications (Gertze, 2017; Sutrisno & Pillay, 2014); culture and indigenous knowledge systems (Thaman, 2006, 2015); and climate change and sustainability (Hemstock et al., 2016).

Broadly speaking, research on Fiji HE since 2000 frames Fiji HE in three ways: as shaped by global development concepts; as faced with issues resulting from *ad-hoc* connections and expansions; and as it is shaped by teaching and learning, culture and technology. These framings are influenced by a wider literature on regional partnerships and development.

Although some literature explores HE policies developed at Fiji's State-level, I have found no studies that provide an empirical account of State-level and HEI-level development in HE since the 2006 coup. This paper adds to existing research on contemporary Fiji by providing an empirical account of Fiji HE that draws on interviews with two groups of HE stakeholders: State-level staff (who work in government ministries), and HEI staff from across a range of Fiji HEIs. Given Fiji's political context, interviews with HE stakeholders required me to balance care and rigour. The Fijian Vanua Research Framework proved invaluable as a basis for doing so. I explain this next.

Fijian Vanua Research Framework

The Fijian Vanua Research Framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008) provides a guide for following the rules of the vanua (land) to gather and use data in a culturally appropriate manner. While, as noted, 'vanua' translates literally as 'land', in the 'Fijian Vanua Research Framework', 'vanua' denotes a sense of valuing things related to Fijians and Fiji's (indigenous) cultural context (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

The Fijian Vanua Research Framework is an "indigenous theoretical approach embedded in indigenous Fijian world views, knowledge systems, lived experience, representations, cultures and values" (Nabobo-Baba, 2008, p.143). The Fijian Vanua Research Framework was developed by Nabobo-Baba (2008), who explains that it was informed by indigenous Fijian cultural practices and is situated within the broader scholarship on decolonising research and research methodologies. Baba et al. (2004) and other indigenous scholars deem 'research' a form of colonisation (Smith, 1997; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) argues that by decolonising research and research methodologies, indigenous researchers can re-establish their own engagement with scholarly authority to "make sense of our own world while also attempting to transform what counts as important in the world of the powerful".

The Vanua Framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008) sits alongside other frameworks aimed at decolonising the research process in Pacific contexts, for example the value of respectful critique and ongoing re-framing (Sanga & Reynolds, 2017). Other examples include the Tivaevae from the Cook Islands

(Maua-Hodges, 2001), the Iluvatu from Fiji (Naisilisili, 2012), Kaupapa Maori approaches from New Zealand (Smith, 1997), the Fa'afaletui and the Ula from Samoa (Sauni, 2011; Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave, & Bush, 2005), the Kakala from Tonga (Thaman, 1997) and the Ola Lei from Tuvalu (Panapa, 2014).

The Vanua Research Framework applies specifically to the Fijian setting and reflects acceptable *īTaukei* practices in Fiji. Its intent is to ensure that researchers uphold Fijians' cultural, socio-political, emotional, psychological, philosophical and spiritual control over their own lives and livelihoods, or that research contributes to the enhancement and positive transformation of the lives of Fijians (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

Nabobo-Baba (2008) notes that researchers from Fiji, who study overseas and return to Fiji to collect data, must navigate both academic and vanua values, which may sometimes conflict. She argues that in Fiji, 'vanua' protocols must drive research — culturally appropriate and sensitive framings and methodologies, that underpin indigenous Fijian worldviews, grounded in both methodological integrity and cultural knowledge (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). For Nabobo-Baba, this ensures that Fijians are active participants in the research process.

The Fijian Vanua Research Framework outlines nine steps that must be considered in order for research to be culturally appropriate when conducted on Fijian soil or vanua (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). The nine steps are as follows:

1. Na navunavuci (conception)
2. Na vakavakarau (preparation and planning)
3. Na i curucuru/na i sevusevu (entry)
4. Na talanoa/veitalanoa (multilogue/dialogue/monologue/story collection)
5. Na i tukutuku (reporting/analysis/writing)
6. Na vakavinavinaka (gifting/thank you)
7. I tatau (departure)
8. Vakarogotaki lesu tale/taleva lesu (reporting back, revisiting the site to present/inform chiefs and participants of completion)
9. Me vakilai/me na i vurevure ni veisau se na vei ka e vou ka na kauta mai na bula e sautu (transformative processes/change as a result of research reports)

As a culturally appropriate framework for knowledge creation through research in Fiji, the Vanua Framework ensures that research with indigenous Fijians is a collaborative research process (Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). The nine-step process places the onus on the researcher to ensure the research has value in the Fiji context, and privileges Fijians' presence in participating. Although the Vanua Framework is an indigenous framework, in my study, it guided culturally appropriate practice in the Fiji context for participants more broadly (since some of my participants are not *īTaukei*). Below, I describe how Nabobo-Baba (2008) explains each of the nine steps, and discuss their application to my research .

Adapting the Fijian Vanua Research Framework

As a Fijian researcher studying in New Zealand, I came with my own understanding and experience of carrying out research or conducting interview consultations in Fiji. I was aware that academic research on Fiji's soil, which explored the finer details of established systems and processes and rested on the involvement of humans in a sensitive political context, would require a courteous and delicate approach. I found the Vanua Research Framework helpful as it provided a guide to conduct research in Fiji that centred on indigenous Fijian cultural concerns or practices, and ethical considerations.

Table 1 illustrates how I adapted the Fijian Vanua Research Framework for my research process. Specifically, my research involved three key phases that were shaped by my physical location in New Zealand (Step A), Fiji (Step B) and both New Zealand and Fiji (Step C). These phases aligned with the steps of the Fijian Vanua Research Framework (see Table 1).

Table 1 *The adapted Fijian Vanua Research Framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).*

Step	Phases
A (New Zealand)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Na navunavuci (Conception) 2. Na vakavakarau (Preparation and Planning)
B (Fiji)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Na i curucuru/na i sevusevu (Entry) 4. Na talanoa/veitalanoa (Multilogue/Dialogue/Story Collection) 5. Na vakavinavinaka (Gifting/Thank yous) 6. I tatau (Departure)
C (New Zealand and Fiji)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Na i tukutuku (Analysis/Writing/Reporting) 8. Vakarogotaki lesu tale/taleva lesu (Reporting back/ revisiting for the purpose of presentation/ informing people) 9. Me vakilai/me na i vurevure ni veisau se na vei ka e vou ka na kauta mai na bula e sautu (Transformative processes/change as a result of research reports)

Phase 5 of the Fijian Vanua Framework (originally 'Na i tukutuku - Analysis/Writing/Reporting') was shifted to phase 7 (Step C) because I returned to New Zealand to analyse the interviews and policy documents before the findings were reported back to the various stakeholders. I outline each step in more detail below.

STEP A

1. Na navunavuci (Conception)

Na navunavuci (conception) is the beginning of the research processes. The na navunavuci involves planning the logistics of the research from start to finish. This includes how participants will be recruited, deciding on appropriate gifts (as forms of reciprocity), and how to liaise with those who

decide to participate, such as when and where to meet. This step also includes consideration of the research protocols of the researcher's institutional and ethical approval processes and where the researcher will conduct the research. Conducting research in Fiji requires formal approval, which may involve chiefs, community leaders, State-level leaders (government ministries) and various stakeholders who are highly respected in Fiji society (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

Phase 1 (Conception) of my study took place in New Zealand, where I was studying at the University of Otago, although in the latter stages of Phase 1, I was also liaising with people in Fiji. Since 'conception' involves the conceptualisation of the research from start to finish, at this stage, I decided on the research topic and questions and data collection methods and obtained the necessary approvals (from the University of Otago and the Ministry of Education, Fiji) to enable the collection of data. My primary concern was to ensure that the planned research in Fiji would be prudent, realistic, respectful and discreet.

The conception phase details were finalised during the preparation and planning phase (Phase 2), which I describe below.

2. Na vakavakarau (Preparation and Planning)

Na vakavakarau (preparation and planning) takes into consideration costs, physical location and terrain, the religious or spiritual influence and intangible factors that may shape the research (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). These include unspoken protocols involved in Fiji customary practices. For example, any person seeking to do research in a village setting would require the chief's permission. The researcher needs to be accompanied by males (her uncles or male counterparts). Then, usually, a male presents the purpose of the research, the visit and the contribution to the researched village. The ceremony is followed with presentations of gifts to the chief and his people as a sign of respect and to attain blessings. A female researcher usually sits behind the males and bows her head as a sign of respect. She only speaks when she is asked to do so (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

During na vakavakarau, the village/community calendar needs to be considered. The researcher might not be able to find participants if people are occupied. Nabobo-Baba (2008) emphasises that in planning to prepare and meet people, the researcher should always note that relationships are going to be established with the people and the community, as they hold the knowledge. Therefore, in good preparation, considering others' time, events and schedules are not only a pragmatic consideration, but also a key aspect of ensuring understanding and respect (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

My preparation and planning phase involved four parts before I reached Fiji to conduct the research: (1) the ethics approval application process, (2) the selection and organising of participants and policy documents, (3) the selection of appropriate interview venues and gifts, and (4) the logistics relating to travel and research funds.

The ethics approval to conduct my research involved two aspects. The first was gaining ethics approval from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. As a Pacific Island student conducting research in the Pacific, my application for ethical approval needed to align with the University of Otago's Pacific Research Protocols (Bennett et al., 2013).

The second step for gaining ethics approval involved applying for a research permit from the Fiji Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts Research and Ethics Council. In Fiji, the Permanent Secretary for Education has the right to revoke, extend or approve all research approved through the Research and Ethics Council (Ministry of Education, 2014). I lodged a research permit application in Fiji following ethical approval from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. The Permanent Secretary then approved my application for Education, and I began to initiate work on the recruitment of participants and the collection of policy documents.

As I prepared and planned for recruiting ideal participants (while I was still in New Zealand), I considered two criteria: (prospective) participants' roles, and their experience in Fiji's HE sector between 2007 and 2017. I chose to limit my interviewing to two major stakeholder groups in Fiji HE: those who worked at the State-level, and those who worked within HEIs. I was especially mindful of potential risks for participants involved in the research. With this in mind, I developed an Information and Consent form highlighting possible risks and providing participants with the option of remaining anonymous (or not, depending on which option they preferred).

I began recruiting participants from State-level organisations who were high ranking public civil servants, with more than five years of experience in the field of education and HE. Some had HEI experience and industry experience. The participants were from the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts; the Fiji Higher Education Commission; and the Ministry for Employment Opportunities, Productivity and Industrial Relations. I knew that staff from each of these State-level organisations would have insights into Fiji HE.

I also began recruiting participants who were high ranking staff members within small, medium and large HEIs. The HEIs' sizes were determined, based on their enrolment ranges by headcount per year. Based on a 'maximum variation' sampling approach (Patton, 1990), I planned to select as diverse a range of HEIs as possible in terms of size and scope within the Fiji context. As well as recruiting participants from different sized HEIs, I sought to include staff from faith-based and religious HEIs, technical and vocational colleges, and universities.

My preparation and plans to collect the second set of data – Fiji's policy documents – was based on a search of online websites. If relevant policy documents were not available online, I collected hard copies from the various ministries and HEIs while in Fiji. I collected nine policies, which represented the law, State-level and HEI-level (three policies per level – see further classification in Phase 7). I aimed to explore connections and disconnections between the policy documents, across policy levels, and between the policy documents and interview data.

Deciding on appropriate interview venues and gifts was also a crucial part of the planning phase. When I sent out the information kits, and participants agreed to take part in the research, I was very conscious of the need to arrange to meet in appropriate venues. For example, if a participant chose to meet at a coffee shop, I suggested an option that would be relatively empty or quiet so that the audio recording would be audible for the later stage of transcribing. I worked around participants' schedules, agreeing to a time suitable and convenient for them. Most participants chose to be interviewed in the morning or at lunchtime.

Gifts and tokens of appreciation show gratitude for the knowledge shared and the participants' assistance with the research. With the majority of participants in professional roles, working for State and HEIs, souvenirs from the University of Otago were suitable and appropriate. Given that I was flying from New Zealand to Fiji to conduct the research, I had to take into account research funding and weight considerations when selecting these gifts.

Lastly, upon finalising my preparations and plans for the research phase in Fiji, I had to organise funds to enable my travel and the data collection process. Being a recipient of the New Zealand Pacific Scholarship from Fiji provided me with a 'home allocated research fund'. In return, I agreed to present my research findings following completion of the doctorate and because it aligned with Phase 8 (Reporting back/revisiting for the purpose of presentation/informing people (*vakarogotaki lesu tale/taleva lesu*) of the Vanua Framework.

STEP B

3. Na i curucuru/na i sevusevu (Entry)

When conducting research in Fiji, the *na i curucuru/ na i sevusevu* (entry) into a vicinity is a customary process (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). A research vicinity could be a participant's home, village, community or office. Decisions about the preferred venue for the research normally involves a compromise between the researcher and the participant(s). However, 'entry' is not only negotiated at the start of the research process. It is also negotiated over time in ways that may depend on the nature of the research.

Initially, the *na i curucuru/ na i sevusevu* phase normally involves a presentation of gifts from the researcher or those entering into the researched venue. The gifting is a show of reverence, to acknowledge the other party's time and resources, followed by the expression of cooperation desired in the research process. What gifts are considered appropriate depends on the places and ranks of people involved. For example, the *i sevusevu* (*Kava/Yaqona* presentation) can appropriately be used in a village setting where there is a chief, and the village heads are present. *Kava* is a beverage prepared from crushed rhizome and roots of the plant, which leaves an anaesthetic effect on the tongue. *Kava* is valued in Pacific island communities such as Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and Vanuatu, and while it was a sacred drink for the chiefs, it is now commonly shared at social gatherings ("Kava", 1988). However, in urban areas, research conducted in a restaurant or an office incurs a cost to the researcher in terms of purchasing a meal and beverage for the participant or presenting a souvenir/gift from the researcher's place of work (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

'Entry' is considered a crucial part of the research process within the Fijian Vanua Research Framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). With this in mind, before arriving at a participant's venue of work, home or vicinity, I asked them again, but in person (as the first 'asking' was through emails or telephone), to grant permission or give their 'blessings' to proceed with the research. By doing this, I reaffirmed to participants that I would abide by their wishes and that I was not going to exploit or take advantage of their sharing of knowledge.

Most participants asked to meet with me in homes, offices and cafes. Visits to participants' houses generally involved having morning tea made by their families. According to Fijian protocol, this meant that I had to purchase some refreshments to present upon arrival, and not 'enter' with nothing. If interviews were hosted at a participant's office, they offered tea or coffee and checked on the comfort of my seat or whether the room temperature suited me, which are signs of the generous Fijian hospitality and care for visitors. In these cases, I showed my deepest gratitude by reassuring my hosts that I was comfortable, while also giving them space to lead the conversation on what they preferred, followed by the discussion about my research.

Some interviews were scheduled with HEI staff before Christmas, and because the students had left the campus for the holidays, the cafes in the HEIs were a quiet and relaxing preference for the staff. I chose to wear a University of Otago T-shirt to represent my institution, and I ensured that I wore something suitable (long skirts or dresses), in case the 'talanoa' (informal conversation) process required me to sit on the floor ('talanoa' discussed in detail in Phase 4). Sitting on the floor during a talanoa, whether formal or informal, signifies the host's comfortableness to openly share or converse about topics – a common practice shared in Fiji and other Pacific Island countries.

4. Na talanoa/ veitalanoa (Multilogue/dialogue/monologue/story collection)

According to Nabobo-Baba (2008) 'data' is best collected in Fiji through 'talanoa' (see details below). The protocols for embarking on a na talanoa/veitalanoa (multilogue/dialogue/ monologue/ storytelling) are determined by several factors and processes, such as:

- the participant's age and social status;
- the researcher's gender and social status, in comparison to the participant's age and status;
- whether it was appropriate to present gifts on arrival or departure;
- the kind of questions asked (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

The interview session with the HEIs and State-level participants involved talanoa. Talanoa involves engagement not only in conversation, but also with the heart and mind of those spoken to (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014). Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2014) explain that "talanoa has been defined as 'talking about nothing in particular', 'chat' or 'gossip'. It is within the cultural milieu of talanoa that knowledge and emotions are shared, and new knowledge is generated" (319). There are various interpretations of the term 'talanoa'. For instance, Vaiolleti (2006) sees talanoa in two parts: 'tala' meaning to inform, share or relate, while 'noa' is nothing in particular, hence, 'talking about nothing in particular'. Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2014) also describe talanoa as a process to 'offload', for example, to share feelings, or one's state of mind and ideas. My use of talanoa as a data collection approach was aimed at facilitating conversation in a culturally appropriate way, allowing participants to guide the conversation and allowing for conversation beyond the research itself. Vaiolleti (2006) and Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) suggest that if cultural appropriateness is not considered, research can harm participants and their communities.

My data collection involved talanoa sessions; however, how I demonstrated respect in a talanoa session depended on the social status of the people I interviewed. In addition, talanoa sessions could either be formal or informal, depending on the participant's preference. For example, the HEI participants

in leadership roles preferred to be interviewed within an hour and in a formal manner by following the outlined questions. In contrast, other participants felt that the talanoa session was a valuable time to share their personal stories of struggles within the HE sector beyond their designated role, leading to a more informal dialogue. Interviews took one hour on average; however, more in-depth discussion of emotions alongside the interview questions took up to two hours. The initial questions communicated to participants were based on my research questions, but the participants guided the actual conversational structure in each talanoa session.

Some HEI participants seemed to assume that, as a researcher and former State-level employee, I would share their concerns about HE in Fiji, and have relevant connections with State-level HE leadership through which their concerns might be addressed. However, other participants felt the need to cover issues within the set timeframe and focused on the prescribed interview questions as a basis for sharing their experiences and stories.

In the talanoa sessions, both HEI and State-level participants shared diverse ideas regarding HE goals, quality and standards, leadership, and the future. Mostly, participants were careful to speak professionally; however, our talanoa also revealed unspoken truths and emotions. For example, some participants recalled the 1987 coup and the traumatic impact on their teaching experience. Sometimes they became emotional when recalling their experiences of teaching and trying to survive. When participants became emotional during an interview, I maintained an empathetic, respectful approach, and I awaited my turn and attentively listened to their emotional narration, as trust had been established. In some cases, I stopped audio recordings on request. In these delicate situations, I was guided by my *iTaukei* (indigenous Fijian) understandings of how to proceed with care. For example, to demonstrate respect for the participant, I fetched water or tissues silently, and in reverence for the story shared, I bowed my head in silence and listened. Nabobo-Baba (2006) notes that in Fiji, silence is not an empty gesture, but a sign of eloquence, where there is a deep engagement between participants, reciprocating respect for the exchange of the knowledge/stories shared.

Following some talanoa sessions, participants suggested policy documents for me to include in the research, including HEI and State-level strategic plans and annual reports (see Phase 8). Some participants felt that their explanations were better represented in their institution's vision and mission statements. Others considered the contents of their policy documents as measurables to vouch for the excellent work they had contributed to Fiji's development.

5. Na vakavinavinaka (Gifting/Thank you)

Nabobo-Baba (2006) explains that the word 'vinaka' in the Fijian language (*Na vosa vaka-Viti*) translates to 'thank-you' and is used by Fijians to express gratitude in all situations, even in circumstances that may not warrant it as a way of expressing emotion. This is because it is deeply rooted in the spirituality of the people and the belief that it is important to be grateful in, and for all things. Therefore, *na vakavinavinaka* (gifting and thank you) is an exchange of gratitude between the researcher, for the consent given by the *vanua* to be researched and the knowledge shared. It expresses the intention and expectation that the people in the *vanua* will benefit from the research. *Na vakavinavinaka* is an expected, unwritten norm in the culture; whether materialised through tangible

gifts or in other ways (for example, acts of service for the family or community), it must take place. The type of gifting depends on the research carried out, the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the position held by those researched in the vanua. For example, if participants are senior members of society, a young indigenous researcher displays reverence as though the senior participants resemble their parents. In doing so, the young researcher expresses delight for the senior participant's time by purchasing a meal or gifting them with something they can use or share with their family. Therefore, gratitude is usually expressed through gift exchange, where the researcher offers a small token of appreciation in return for the time, knowledge and resources the research participants have offered. The exchange does not denote closure of the researcher-participant relationship. Rather, it builds on the relationship between the two parties (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

At the conclusion of each interview, I offered the participant a gift as a token of humble appreciation. Smiles on some participants' faces when gifts were given suggested that a trust, bond and network had been established. However, while people appreciated the gifts, some who were in higher status positions told me to give their gift to someone else I chose to interview. While, at face value, refusal of gifts may seem offensive, these participants were showing consideration towards me as a student researcher, since I had many further interviews scheduled.

6. I tatau (Departure)

In Fijian custom, the *i tatau* (departure) takes place before the research is finished. This means that while participants acknowledge the researcher's departure from their location, the researcher knows that the *i tatau* is not the conclusion of the research journey. The *i tatau* culminates with the presentation of either the traditional Fijian plant (Yaqona) or the Tabua (whale's tooth) to the vanua (people). The Tabua is a sperm whale tooth presented at numerous formal occasions. It is a valuable chiefly item that is exchanged by Fijians for sentimental purposes, for example, at a Fijian wedding (Hooper, 2013). The Yaqona or Tabua (or both) is presented to seek blessings, acknowledge the relationship between the researcher and vanua, and it also opens the door to any future requests. The ceremonial *i tatau* symbolises a promise that the researcher will return to the vanua after their departure. In a research context, it is the assurance given by the researcher that although the research work may be conducted away from the vanua, perhaps in a local University or even abroad, the *i tatau* is only temporary. The vanua can expect to receive the researcher again in the future, as the relationships formed are continuous. The *i tatau* is more about the cultivation and harnessing of ongoing relationships than it is about the presentation of a traditional item (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

The process of departing from participants' homes, or cafes and offices, varied. In the home settings, once the interview was conducted, I thanked the participant deeply, recognising the sense of trust and bond we had established. A sense of 'trust' had been firmly established through Phase 1 to 5 of the Fijian Vanua Research Framework, and at departure, ongoing trust was expressed through an agreement that I would be back in contact with results later.

When departing from a cafe/restaurant, gifts/souvenirs were exchanged at the end of the interview. Sometimes, after the gift-giving, participants requested to stay in touch during the analysis and finding

phase of my research. Others did not ask for this, but wished me well on my research journey, and thanked me for conducting research that was beneficial to Fiji's HE sector. Departure from offices was more formal. A firm handshake and reassurance on my part to be in touch regarding the information shared and the analysis and report write-up phase authenticated our ongoing sense of trust.

STEP C

7. Na i tukutuku (Analysis/Reporting/Writing)

Researchers conducting research in Fiji are guided by the knowledge and protocols of the vanua. During na i tukutuku (Analysis/Reporting/Writing), the researcher needs to carefully consider the information that emerges during data collection in response to, and aside from, the researcher's research questions (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). The researcher may decide not to share some information in their research reporting, such as unspoken truths and emotions that are expressed, or information shared with the researcher in confidence. This means that the researcher's enthusiasm for listening to, and documenting stories must be balanced with respect for the participant's trust. Lastly, the core element all researchers should remember is that the 'trust' that he/she has established with participants should not be treated casually (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

Upon returning to New Zealand, I organised the transcription of the twenty interviews and analysed the transcripts using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; King & Horrocks, 2010). I also analysed seventeen policy documents using document content analysis (Cardno, 2018).

Transcription

From the 20 interviews, I transcribed twelve audio recordings myself, and a professional transcription typist transcribed six. My mother transcribed two audio recordings because large portions of the interviews were in the Fijian language. I felt that it was safe to include my mother (who is iTaukei) because she is a Fijian language speaker, and she understood both the nature of my study and the Fiji political and cultural context. Notably, I sought permission from the two participants for my mother to transcribe their comments from Fijian to English, and they happily agreed for me to proceed. In light of the Fijian Vanua Framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008), I chose to transcribe twelve interviews where the participants held respected and top roles in the HE sector and wanted to remain anonymous. Also, the interviews included sensitive information pertaining to certain individuals, and State-level organisations which needed appropriate care and consideration of the promised trust granted to me. The six interviews transcribed by a professional transcription typist did not include content that would be considered contentious in relation to Fiji's HE sector. The two interviews that my mother transcribed included English sentences combined with Fijian language sentences. I recognised that the combination of the Fijian language with technical terms and jargon could become problematic for the transcribing process (King et al., 2010).

Thematic Analysis Process

My approach to thematic analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke (2013), King et al. (2010), and Thomas (2006). Specifically, in line with King et al. (2010), I coded the data in three stages: stage one—descriptive coding, stage two—interpretive coding and stage three—overarching themes. At stage one (descriptive coding), I first listened to the interviews and read the transcriptions multiple times to become familiar with the content. At stage two (interpretive coding), I re-read the transcripts with the descriptive codes and began to identify overlaps with some of the codes, which I then clustered. At stage three (overarching themes), I began to identify themes that described and captured the key concepts in my analysis. Thus, the themes that were “recurrent and distinctive features of participants’ accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which [I saw] as relevant to the research question” (King et al., 2010:200).

Document Analysis

When I concluded coding the interview transcripts, I analysed the policy documents, using the document (content) analysis approach outlined by Bowen (2009) and Cardno (2018). Document analysis is the application of a systematic procedure to the evaluation of (printed or electronic) documents (Bowen, 2009), that focuses on “analysing the words, language or text in documents” (Cardno, 2018:632). I analysed 17 policy documents in total. I collected policies from law, State-level and HEI-level (three at each level), as “all leadership and management activity in educational settings could be linked to some sort of policy initiative on a global, national or local scale” (Cardno, 2018:624). In selecting which policy documents to analyse, I included documents that had shaped Fiji HE in law, and at the State-level and HEI-level; and that had a range of target audiences, rationales and authors (Bowen, 2009).

My analysis of the transcripts and policy documents revealed commonalities, tensions, and contradictions. However, in line with Nabobo-Baba’s (2008) conceptualisation of the ‘analysis/reporting (Na i tukutuku)’ phase, I was concerned with acting responsibly when unpacking information and presenting it back for discussion and/or utilisation. With this in mind, I took the following steps to ensure that my analysis and writing truthfully represented my study findings in a way that was both respectful towards my participants and constructive for Fiji’s HE sector.

First, I shared the transcripts with my participants who wanted to read their transcripts and alter content if need be. Second, I sought to maintain the complexity of participants’ voices throughout the coding and writing process, by acknowledging multiple ‘readings’ of the data, situating the data in relation to the historical and cultural context in and to which participants spoke, and (where possible) checking my interpretations with participants (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). In this sense, the Vanua Research Framework guided my behaviour as researcher, and my attention to the possible implications of stakeholders’ interpretation of my research in the Fiji context. Third, I shared my analysis with my supervisors and checked whether they felt my ‘tone’ was appropriate or likely to cause harm. Fourth, while five participants wanted to be anonymous, I anonymised all participants because I felt the analysis might compromise them in some way (even when the participants had said they did not need to be anonymised). Fifth, I shared my anonymised writing with my family – who understood the Fiji context, and the political sensitivities of Fiji — and invited their feedback on whether my ‘tone’ might

risk causing harm; and sixth, I shared my analysis with a wider audience, especially with peers and senior researchers from the Pacific context, and sought advice/critique from them.

8. Vakarogotaki lesu tale/taleva lesu (reporting back, revisiting the site to present/inform chiefs and participants of completion)

Presenting the *i tatau* invokes the unspoken understanding between the researcher and the *vanua* that the researcher will return. *Vakarogotaki lesu tale* (to take the information back) or *taleva lesu* (*taleva* means go through it again, *lesu* means back) is a formality, when the researcher returns to the *vanua* upon completion of the research to express gratitude for the support provided during the time away by presenting a report. If the researcher is an insider (a part of the *vanua* and the academy), returning to the *vanua* is considered appropriate and customary. It is disrespectful not to return, and the visit is not on an *ad hoc* basis, but rather, is carefully planned and thought through within the available budget. The visit involves a presentation of the researcher's completed work. Certain parts of the *vanua* have a vested interest in the researcher's work and continue to 'look after' the researcher even while away. *Vakarogotaki lesu tale* brings the researcher home to the *vanua* to share and inform the people about the completion of their work (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

Upon returning to Fiji, it is appropriate that I, as a Fijian researcher, pay a visit to all those who contributed to my research. Nabobo-Baba (2008) places a strong emphasis on this process because face-to-face reporting reflects the upbringing and customs of the researcher and their care for the country and its people. Nabobo-Baba (2008) noted that it is "ill-mannered and disrespectful" if the researcher returns to their home country and does not visit or acknowledge those who have dedicated their time and sharing to build the thesis narrative.

I intended to accomplish two things upon returning to Fiji at the conclusion of my doctoral studies. The first was to send a thank-you note and a brief report or summary of the overall thesis to all those who participated in the interviews. The second was to use the visual illustrations included in my thesis to present my research and begin conversations with HE stakeholders and the general public (for example, in secondary schools, religious communities or villages) on matters faced by Fiji's HE sector. For inclusivity, I intended to have my content translated into the main languages spoken in Fiji (both Fijian and Hindi). However, my return coincided with the outbreak of COVID-19 in Fiji, so I have not yet completed this part of the research process. My intent is to continue maintaining appropriate care for the sector by reporting back on my research when pandemic conditions allow, while continuing to use the *vanua* protocols (for example, seeking advice from experts in the sector before engaging in difficult or potentially problematic conversations).

9. Me vakilai/me na i vurevure ni veisau se na vei ka e vou ka na kauta mai na bula e sautu (Transformative processes/change as a result of research reports)

The final step in the research is one of change and transformation. *Vakarogotaki lesu tale* (to take the information back) sees the researcher return to the *vanua* and present the completed research. Reasons include *me vakilai* (to let it be known) or *me na i vurevure ni veisau se na vei ka e vou ka na kauta mai na bula e sautu* (to provide a source of change or new things to bring fruitful life). This stage completes

the researcher's work in terms of transformation and change in the lives of the people (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). This final step is the outcome of the researcher's work. Change, as a result of the research, may occur immediately or over some time, and it may directly or indirectly benefit the vanua (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

Like other indigenous research frameworks (see earlier), the Fijian Vanua Research Framework emphasises the importance of respect for place, participants and seniority; reciprocity and respect; working face to face with people; and maintaining relationships throughout and beyond the research process. However, by initiating conversations about HE and my research in both direct and indirect ways, I hope that my research may benefit policymakers, HE leaders, the research community and the public in the future.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have described the Fijian Vanua Research Framework and explained how it provided me with culturally appropriate ways to carry out my doctoral research in Fiji. I described how I adapted the nine phases of the framework to collect, interpret and use my data, specifically: (1) Na navunavuci (Conception), (2) Na vakavakarau (Preparation and Planning), (3) Na i curucuru/na i sevusevu (Entry), (4) Na talanoa/veitalanoa (Multilogue/Dialogue/Story Collection), (5) Na vakavinavinaka (Gifting/Thank yous), (6) I tatau (Departure), (7) Na i tukutuku (Analysis/Writing/Reporting), (8) Vakarogotaki lesu tale/taleva lesu (Reporting back/ revisiting for the purpose of presentation/informing people), (9) Me vakilai/me na i vurevure ni veisau se na vei ka e vou ka na kauta mai na bula e sautu (Transformative processes/change as a result of research reports). The final two phases are yet to be undertaken.

I have explained how the Vanua Framework allowed me to carefully consider the processes involved at all stages of the research. I recognise research as an interpretive process, but also as a political undertaking. By this, I mean that research takes place within broader relations of power, and as an exercise in 'naming the world' it can do both good and harm. In this regard, I have found the Vanua Research Framework invaluable as a guide for decision-making at all stages of the research. While these stages are not yet complete, the Vanua Research Framework provides me with a theoretical/ethical guide for exploring my participants' experiences carefully in relation to their historical and cultural context, and in ways that might contribute to improving HE in that context, moving forward. Key principles that link all nine phases of the Vanua Research Framework are the importance of establishing and maintaining trust, and demonstrating respect for people, and their knowledge and stories shared. The Vanua Framework guided my research in a way that was responsible and careful so that in the future, my findings can be carefully presented back for discussion and/or utilisation in Fiji.

While, I would not claim that I have made a theoretical contribution to the Fijian Vanua Research Framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008), I have demonstrated in my study how the Fijian Vanua Research Framework can be applied to research in modern settings (here, with state-ministries and HEIs), to

ensure the cultural safety of both researcher and participants. My application of the Fijian Vanua Research Framework to politically sensitive research in the Fiji context offers a theoretical contribution to the literature on research ethics. My study demonstrated how an indigenous research framework that centres reciprocity and respect might guide politically sensitive student research in a way that is safe for both the student (who is 'bonded' to return home) and the research participants.

While other studies have applied the Fijian Vanua Research Framework to sports management (Stewart-Withers, Sewabu, & Richardson, 2017), female empowerment and tourism (Movono & Dahles, 2017), and other indigenous practices (Meo-Sewabu, 2014), mine is the first to apply it to HE research. The Fijian Vanua Research Framework was critically important in guiding my exploration of stakeholders' perspectives, and appropriate treatment of the vanua (land) and its people. If my study had not been informed by the principles outlined in this framework, I may not have been trusted by the participants sufficiently for them to share their insights with me.

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