



Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Board
“Building a Smarter Fiji”

MEDIA RELEASE

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Phone : 8921240

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Email : ceo@tslb.com.fj

Clarification on the Suspension of funding for certain Medical Programs and Scholarships for Counselling program

The Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Board wishes to provide some clarity on the recent issues raised in relation to the above matters:

1. Suspension of MBBS, Oral Health, and Oral Health and Dental Surgery programs from NTS and TELS Funding

Funding for new intake from 2021 for these programs have been suspended under the National Toppers Local Scholarship Scheme and Tertiary Education Loans Scheme. This is in line with the fiscal policy changes announced in the 2020/2021 National budget.

The simple rationale behind the suspension of these programs is that we have now reached our nation’s full capacity for all such areas of expertise as well as qualified and trained doctors.

These programs were listed under the national priority areas of the Fijian Government since the inception of the NTS and TELS in 2014 and these programs were included to ensure that Fiji has an adequate number of trained doctors, oral hygienists and dentists.

Since 2014, the Fijian Government has been allocating adequate funding for the purpose of training doctors, oral hygienists and dentists to meet the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) requirements for the doctor patient ratio. Since the inception of the new merit based National Toppers Local Scholarship Scheme and the Tertiary Education Loans Scheme, TSLB has funded 934 students for the MBBS program and 202 students for the Bachelor of Oral Health and Bachelor of Oral Health and Dental Surgery, combined under these schemes.

Between the period 2014 to 2020, 144 students have already graduated in MBBS, 31 with Bachelor of Oral Health and another 72 with Bachelor of Oral Health and Dental Surgery. It is important to note that a number of students who have completed their three-year Bachelor of Oral Health Program have opted to upgrade their qualification to the five-year Bachelor of Oral Health and Dental Surgery and this is also funded by TSLB. In addition, 6 Fijians have completed their MBBS program under the bilateral donor funded scholarship in Cuba and have returned to Fiji at the end of 2020.

The number of students funded by TSLB with the current status and estimated number of graduates from 2021 to 2025 is provided in the table below:

Program	Current Active No:	Graduated 2014-2020	Est. Graduates 2021	Est. Graduates 2022	Est. Graduates 2023	Est. Graduates 2024	Est. Graduates 2025	Total Est. Graduates by 2025
MBBS	689	245	128	159	184	108	110	934
Bachelor of Oral Health	73	31	11	50	12	-	-	104
Bachelor in Dental Surgery	26	72	8	18	-	-	-	98

It is important to note that apart from around 1000 graduate doctors now in Fiji as at the end of end of 2020, over 100 new TSLB funded graduates will be joining the profession from 2021 to 2025 annually. This is in addition to the privately funded students joining the services.

With the 2020 graduates joining the profession, Fiji now has enough trained and qualified doctors to meet the WHO benchmark. This has also been confirmed by Ministry of Health and Medical Services in a recent media announcement whereby clarification has been provided that there is no shortage of Doctors in Fiji now.

By 2025, this benchmark would have been exceeded as there are currently 689 active students under NTS and TELS pursuing a qualification in MBBS who are expected to graduate and join the medical profession by 2025.

Having fulfilled these important criteria, it was vital for the Fijian Government to review the priority areas for funding. This is why funding for these programs have now been suspended under NTS and TELS in the next financial year. Existing students already under these schemes will be allowed to complete their studies on the terms and conditions as per the loan or scholarship bond agreement.

Students who have completed Year 13 in 2020 are strongly encouraged to explore other priority areas within the scholarship categories. For example, within the Medical and Health Category, scholarships are still available in Nursing, Physiotherapy, Dietetics, Public Health, Medical Lab Sciences, Pharmacy and Medical Imaging Science.

A number of these programs also provide a pathway for the MBBS program and students completing these programs under NTS still have an opportunity to pursue their MBBS program post-graduation. They may do so as private students or any other scholarships or loans scheme that may be available in the future. However, students must check directly with the Higher Education Institutions on their eligibility via alternative pathways to the MBBS program.

In addition to the Medical and Health category, students can also pursue alternative qualifications such as Engineering, Teacher Training, Technology and Town and Land Planning under NTS or TELS provided they meet the qualifying criteria.

It is important for interested Fijians to note that the funding for these schemes have only been suspended and not completely terminated. The Fijian Government will be reviewing this next

year in consultation with the relevant stakeholders to determine when and if they would resume. Work on the review of the national priority areas for 2021 to 2031 has already commenced with the call for submission by TSLB from the interested stakeholders. Following the receipt of submissions and in consultation with all the stakeholders, the human resources needs of the industry sectors (Public/Private and NGO) for the next 10 years will be identified and funding will be allocated in areas that more strongly contributes to the Fijian Government's vision of creating a knowledge based society and to create a more skilled and adaptable workforce.

It is also important for the Fijians to note that TSLB has a fiscal responsibility towards the taxpayers of this country to ensure that the taxpayers money is invested in areas that yield positive return for the country. By suspending funding for these programs, TSLB is ensuring that the labour demand and supply market remains at or near equilibrium levels to avoid surplus or shortages, both of which are detrimental for the long term prosperity of the economy.

2. Increase in allocation for Counselling program under NTS

TSLB strongly welcomes the decision by the Honourable Ministry for Education, Heritage and Arts to increase the number of scholarships available for the Fijians who wish to pursue a career in counselling. A total of 50 scholarships are now available for those planning a career in counselling.

With the eligibility criteria being completion of Year 13 in 2020, with minimum score of 250/400 and a pass in English, TSLB is urging Fijians to apply directly to the eligible Higher Education Institutions who offer Counselling programs for admission, secure a place by means of the offer letter and apply for the National Toppers Scholarship. Counseling has been identified by the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts as a high priority area and as such it is important for the Fijians to pursue qualifications in areas of need for the country to increase the probability of employment post-graduation.

For as long as a student is able to secure a place for the counselling program at an eligible higher education institution and meets the eligibility criteria for NTS, TSLB will make an offer for the NTS scholarship to the students until the set quota of 50 has been met.

**Rakesh Ram
Chairman
Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Board**

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