Opinion

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# Beyond Diploma-Level Training: A Proposed Framework for Undergraduate Counselling Education and Workforce Development in Fiji

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**ABSTRACT**

Counselling education is an important consideration in the development of sustainable mental health and psychosocial support systems in small island developing states. In Fiji, existing certificate and diploma programmes provide entry points into counselling practice, yet publicly available university programme information reviewed for this article did not identify an undergraduate degree exclusively dedicated to counselling. This article examines the implications of this apparent qualification-level gap and proposes an articulated framework connecting entry-level training, undergraduate education, supervised professional practice and postgraduate progression. It draws on a preliminary documentary review of publicly accessible programme information from the University of Fiji and The University of the South Pacific's Pacific Technical and Further Education (Pacific TAFE), alongside regional mental health policy and literature on Pacific health workforce development. The analysis identifies three policy priorities: establishing a verified national counselling qualification map; developing a competency-based undergraduate curriculum grounded in Pacific contexts; and linking educational progression to supervision, professional safeguards and workforce planning. The proposed framework recognises the potential contribution of counselling graduates across education, health, social welfare, justice, corrections and civil society while distinguishing counselling from regulated clinical and specialist professional roles. Rather than claiming that a degree alone can resolve complex psychosocial challenges, the article argues that a structured educational pathway could strengthen workforce development and improve opportunities for existing practitioners. The proposed approach offers a basis for consultation among universities, government ministries, employers, professional bodies and regional partners.

**Keywords:** Counselling Education; Undergraduate Degree; Fiji; Pacific Island Countries; Qualification Pathways; Workforce Development; Mental Health; Psychosocial Support; Professional Standards; Higher Education Policy

## Introduction

The development of sustainable mental health and psychosocial support systems requires more than the availability of services. It also depends on a sufficiently prepared workforce, accessible educational pathways, appropriate professional supervision and coordination between institutions responsible for health and social wellbeing. These requirements are particularly important for small island developing states, where geographical dispersion, limited specialist resources and workforce constraints can complicate service delivery. Pacific communities face interconnected challenges associated with climate-related disasters, displacement, grief, family violence, harmful substance use, HIV-related stigma, youth vulnerability and socioeconomic change. The effects of climate change can extend beyond physical damage to affect psychological wellbeing, livelihoods and community resilience. Research examining disaster-response capacity in Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and the Cook Islands has highlighted the importance of health workforce preparedness, skills development and institutional coordination [1]. The World Health Organization's Regional Framework for the Future of Mental Health in the Western Pacific 2023–2030 similarly emphasises the need for stronger mental health systems, community-based services, workforce capacity and coordinated responses (World Health Organization [WHO] [2]). Within this context, counselling education warrants closer consideration as a component of workforce and higher education policy. Existing certificates and diplomas provide important routes into the field. The further question is whether Fiji also requires a dedicated

undergraduate degree that enables practitioners to develop advanced competencies and progress towards postgraduate study and specialist responsibilities. This article addresses that question through a preliminary documentary review of publicly available counselling programme information and the development of a proposed educational pathway framework. Its contribution differs from a general argument for counselling education by concentrating on qualification progression, curriculum architecture, professional safeguards and the evidence needed to inform a future degree proposal.

## Approach and Scope of the Documentary Review

This article uses a preliminary documentary review of publicly accessible institutional programme information. The review examined the official counselling programme pages of the University of Fiji and Pacific TAFE at The University of the South Pacific, together with relevant institutional programme descriptions. Regional mental health policy and peer-reviewed literature on Pacific workforce development were considered to establish the broader policy context. The review was designed to identify publicly listed counselling qualifications and consider the implications of their qualification levels for educational progression. It was not a systematic review, a complete audit of all tertiary institutions, or an empirical assessment of employer demand. No interviews, surveys or primary workforce data were collected for this article. The findings must therefore be interpreted within these limitations. An institution's website may not capture every current, planned or recently approved programme, and publicly available information does not independently establish the complete status of programme accreditation. A comprehensive national and regional mapping exercise remains necessary before definitive claims can be made about all available qualifications. This transparent, limited approach provides an initial basis for identifying questions that universities and policymakers should investigate rather than presenting an incomplete programme search as conclusive evidence.

## Existing Counselling Education in Fiji: A Preliminary Programme Map

The institutional programme information reviewed identifies counselling qualifications at certificate and diploma levels. The University of Fiji lists a Diploma in Counselling, while Pacific TAFE lists a Certificate IV in Counselling and a Diploma of Counselling. These programmes provide formal educational opportunities for individuals seeking to enter counselling-related work or strengthen their existing knowledge and skills (Pacific TAFE, n.d. [3]; University of Fiji, n.d. [4]) (Table 1). The distinction between these qualifications and a dedicated undergraduate degree is important. Certificate and diploma programmes can provide valuable foundational or occupational competencies. An undergraduate degree could offer a more extensive and integrated curriculum, with greater scope for advanced theoretical study, research literacy, critical evaluation of practice, specialised electives and preparation for postgraduate education. This preliminary mapping supports a carefully qualified conclusion: the institutional programme pages reviewed did not identify a university offering a dedicated undergraduate counselling degree in Fiji. It does not establish that no such programme exists anywhere in the wider Pacific. That regional question requires a separate, documented review of university calendars, national qualification registers and relevant accreditation authorities. The distinction matters for policy development. A proposal for a new degree should be based on an accurate understanding of existing provision, including whether comparable programmes are available through partnerships, distance learning or institutions outside Fiji [5].

**Table 1:** The following preliminary comparison summarises the publicly listed provision reviewed.

| Institution | Publicly listed counselling qualification | Implication for the proposed pathway |
|---|---|---|
| The University of Fiji | Diploma in Counselling | Provides a formal counselling qualification and a potential foundation for further study. |
| The University of the South Pacific, through Pacific TAFE | Certificate IV in Counselling | Provides an entry-level educational pathway. |
| The University of the South Pacific, through Pacific TAFE | Diploma of Counselling | Provides further occupational learning beyond certificate-level preparation. |
| Undergraduate degree exclusively dedicated to counselling | Not identified in the programme pages reviewed | Warrants further verification and feasibility assessment. |

Note: Source: Preliminary review of official institutional programme information (Pacific TAFE, n.d. [3]; University of Fiji, n.d. [4]).

## The Proposed Contribution: An Articulated Counselling Education Pathway

The principal proposal is to develop a structured pathway that connects existing counselling qualifications with undergraduate and postgraduate education. Such a pathway should not automatically replace existing certificates or diplomas. Instead, it should identify how prior learning and demonstrated competencies could be recognised within an appropriately accredited programme.

### Entry-Level and Undergraduate Progression

The proposed pathway would allow eligible students to enter through recognised admission routes, including direct undergradu-

ate admission and approved articulation arrangements from relevant certificates and diplomas. Where permitted by the applicable qualification framework, recognition of prior learning could be considered through transparent assessment. Admission and credit decisions should remain subject to academic standards, ensuring that students possess the foundational knowledge required for advanced study. An undergraduate degree should provide a coherent sequence of theoretical learning, skills development, ethical preparation, research literacy and supervised practice. It should not simply add more units to an existing diploma without demonstrating a meaningful increase in graduate competencies.

### Postgraduate and Continuing Professional Development

An undergraduate qualification could provide a foundation for further study in areas such as counselling specialisations, supervision, programme leadership, research and related fields, subject to the admission requirements of receiving institutions. Continuing professional development would remain necessary after graduation. Counselling practice involves ongoing ethical responsibilities, changing community needs and situations that may require specialist knowledge. Professional learning should therefore continue throughout a practitioner's career.

### A Pathway for Existing Practitioners

The proposed framework should accommodate practitioners whose qualifications and professional experience differ. Flexible delivery, part-time study and appropriate recognition of prior learning could enable working practitioners to pursue higher qualifications without leaving their communities or employment unnecessarily. This would be particularly valuable for people working in rural areas, outer islands and community-based services. However, the framework should not assume that practical experience automatically substitutes for academic preparation. Any credit awarded must be supported by documented evidence of learning and competency.

## Curriculum Architecture for a Pacific-Focused Degree

The proposed undergraduate degree should be designed around clearly defined graduate outcomes and the professional responsibilities associated with counselling practice. A curriculum framework could include the following interconnected domains.

### Counselling Theory and Practice

Students should develop a critical understanding of counselling approaches, communication, relationship-building, interviewing, intervention planning and the evaluation of practice.

### Human Development and Psychosocial Wellbeing

Study should address human development, family and relationship dynamics, grief, trauma, social determinants of wellbeing and the circumstances that may contribute to psychological distress.

### Ethics, Safeguarding and Professional Responsibility

Graduates should understand confidentiality, informed consent, professional boundaries, safeguarding, risk identification, record management, referral obligations and the limits of their competence.

### Culturally Responsive and Pacific-Informed Practice

The curriculum should engage with Pacific understandings of wellbeing, family and community relationships, spirituality, language diversity and cultural identity while maintaining respect for individual rights, confidentiality and professional ethics.

### Contemporary Social Challenges

Relevant learning could address climate-related distress, disaster recovery, harmful substance use, HIV-related stigma, family violence, youth wellbeing and suicide prevention. These subjects should be taught within an evidence-informed framework and should not imply that counselling alone can resolve structural or medical problems.

### Research Literacy and Programme Evaluation

Students should develop the ability to interpret research, assess evidence, evaluate interventions and contribute to locally relevant knowledge. This is particularly important where the evidence base for counselling approaches in specific Pacific settings remains limited.

### Supervised Practical Experience

Structured placements should enable students to apply their learning under suitable supervision, with appropriate safeguarding, client consent, placement agreements and procedures for managing risk. Together, these domains could distinguish a dedicated undergraduate degree from shorter occupational qualifications while ensuring that its content remains responsive to local needs.

## Workforce Relevance Across Public and Community Services

The potential value of an undergraduate counselling degree extends beyond the health sector. In education, graduates with appropriate competencies could contribute to student wellbeing, early identification of difficulties, school-based support and referral to specialist services. In social welfare and community organisations, they could assist with supportive interventions involving family conflict, grief, violence and social exclusion. Education, Social welfare, Police, corrections and rehabilitation services may also require counselling expertise in supporting victims, people in custody, individuals returning to the community and personnel exposed to distressing situations. NGOs working in HIV prevention and support, youth development, disability, gender-based violence, substance-use prevention and disaster recovery may benefit from a stronger pool of appropriately educated practitioners. These are potential employment and service applications, not established estimates of labour demand. A national workforce study should determine the number and distribution

of practitioners required, the roles employers would recruit them to undertake, the competencies those roles require and the resources available to sustain employment. Clear professional boundaries are essential. Counselling graduates should not be presumed competent to undertake specialist clinical assessments, medical treatment or regulated professional functions solely because they hold a counselling degree. The programme must establish defined graduate competencies and referral arrangements that complement existing health, psychology, social work and statutory services.

## Professional Safeguards and Quality Assurance

The development of a dedicated degree should be accompanied by a framework for quality assurance and professional accountability. First, the qualification should undergo the required academic approval and accreditation processes. Its level, credit structure, admission requirements, learning outcomes and assessment standards should be clearly documented. Second, supervised practice should be mandatory where appropriate to the intended graduate role. The availability of qualified supervisors and suitable placements should be assessed before student intake expands. Third, a competency framework should define the activities graduates can undertake, the circumstances requiring supervision and the situations that must be referred to specialist services. Fourth, institutions and relevant stakeholders should consider appropriate professional development, ethical guidance and mechanisms for handling complaints or concerns about practice. Any proposal for statutory registration or professional regulation would require separate consultation and legal analysis. Finally, programme evaluation should assess graduate completion, employment, retention, employer satisfaction, placement quality and continuing professional development. Longer-term evaluation could examine whether graduates improve access to suitable services, while recognising that community wellbeing is influenced by multiple factors beyond educational provision. These safeguards would help ensure that the proposed degree contributes to a sustainable professional pathway rather than creating an uncoordinated increase in qualifications.

## Policy and Implementation Priorities

A staged implementation strategy is recommended.

1. **Stage 1:** Complete the national and regional qualification map. Universities, qualification authorities and relevant ministries should verify existing programmes, accreditation status, articulation arrangements and comparable qualifications offered elsewhere in the Pacific. The review should distinguish dedicated counselling degrees from degrees in psychology, social work, education or other disciplines that include counselling components.

2. **Stage 2:** Establish workforce demand and competency requirements. Consultation should involve education, health, social welfare, police, corrections, NGOs, employers, current practitioners and relevant professional bodies. The resulting assessment should identify priority roles, service gaps, geographic needs and employment prospects.

3. **Stage 3:** Design and validate the degree. An academic working group should develop graduate outcomes, curriculum content, assessment methods, placement requirements and proposed progression routes. Consultation with Pacific communities should inform the programme's cultural relevance and accessibility.

4. **Stage 4:** Establish partnerships and accessible delivery. Universities and regional partners should explore scholarships, part-time study, distance learning, supervised placement networks and appropriate recognition of prior learning. These arrangements could help practitioners from rural and remote communities participate.

5. **Stage 5:** Evaluate implementation. Before expansion, the programme should be assessed against agreed academic, workforce and service objectives. Evaluation should inform curriculum revision, placement capacity, student support and future enrolment decisions. This staged approach would allow Fiji to consider the educational need while addressing the practical questions of affordability, quality, workforce demand and long-term sustainability.

## Limitations and Future Research

The documentary review underpinning this article is preliminary and limited to publicly accessible institutional programme information. It does not establish the full status of all counselling qualifications in Fiji or the wider Pacific. The review also does not measure the number of practising counsellors, employer demand, service utilisation, graduate employment or the cost of establishing a new degree. Future research should undertake a comprehensive programme mapping exercise across relevant Pacific universities and national qualification registers. It should also investigate employer expectations, practitioners' educational needs, barriers to further study and the feasibility of alternative programme models. A mixed-methods workforce study incorporating institutional data, employer surveys and practitioner interviews would provide a stronger empirical basis for deciding whether a dedicated degree is the most appropriate response and how it should be designed.

## Conclusion

Fiji has established counselling education pathways at certificate and diploma levels, as reflected in the publicly available programme information reviewed for this article. The next policy question is whether an articulated undergraduate degree could provide an academically rigorous and professionally responsible route for advancing counselling education and workforce development. The proposed framework offers a practical starting point. It connects existing qualifications with undergraduate study, postgraduate progression, supervised practice and continuing professional development. It also iden-

tifies the importance of quality assurance, cultural responsiveness, professional boundaries and evidence-based workforce planning. The case for a dedicated undergraduate degree should not rest on the assumption that additional qualifications automatically produce better services. It should rest on a documented assessment of educational progression needs, workforce demand and the competencies required to support communities safely and effectively. Fiji should therefore undertake a comprehensive qualification and workforce review, followed by consultation on the feasibility of a dedicated undergraduate Degree in Counselling. If supported by that evidence, the programme could provide an important foundation for developing a sustainable counselling workforce and strengthening appropriate psychosocial support across Fiji and, through regional collaboration, the wider Pacific.

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