

APPENDICES

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Written Responses



MINISTRY OF CIVIL SERVICE RESPONSES TO THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE QUESTIONS ON THE 202-2021 ANNUAL REPORT

1. What are some key challenges continuously faced by the Ministry?

The Ministry of Civil Service (MCS) was allocated a budget of \$2.9 million, out of which \$2.07 million or 69.24% was utilised during the year. Significant unutilised budget was noted in the Purchase of Good and Services Budget. These savings were in the leadership and training budgets because of COVID 19 restrictions such as travel bans and lockdowns in Fiji which impacted the provision of face-to-face trainings.

Other challenges revolved around the following areas:

- i. Retention of Talent: High turnover rates, especially among skilled professionals, pose a challenge as the other sectors including employment abroad often offer more competitive compensation and benefits packages. The Ministry is actively enhancing its strategies to retain skilled professionals, offering competitive career development opportunities and improving the overall work environment;
- ii. Budget Management: Resource management limits the Ministry's ability to invest broadly in training, development, and recruitment, impacting overall service delivery. Through innovative budgeting and resource allocation, the Ministry is finding effective ways to invest in training, development, and recruitment, ensuring sustained improvement in service delivery;
- iii. Recruitment Processes: some phases of the recruitment procedures delay the recruitment, leading to gaps in critical positions. The Ministry is continuously refining its recruitment processes across service to reduce delays and improve the efficiency of hiring ensuring that critical positions are filled promptly; and
- iv. Policy Compliance: The Ministry is taking proactive measures to ensure compliance with all policies, fostering a culture of change.

Addressing the above stated challenges required a comprehensive strategy involving improved communication, recruitment practices, better employee retention programs, technological modernization, and investment in training and development.

2. Ministry's Goals

a. Inform us on how these goals have been achieved and highlight the challenges faced?

The Ministry of Civil Service (MCS) during the year 2020-2021 worked towards achieving its goals through the implementation of its 2020-2021 Costed Operational Plan. The Ministry demarcates its goals according to the functionalities of its respective divisions. However, some of the goals were significantly affected due to COVID-19 restrictions. As such the Ministry continued with the following key activities;

- i. Support and advice were provided to Ministries to effectively manage recruitment and selection activities where required;
- ii. Worked closely with the then Ministry of Economy to review and develop budget strategies contributing to COVID and TC Yasa recovery;
- iii. Online leave module on the HRMIS was deployed live for use across the Civil Service; and
- iv. Management and staff members kept in touch with each other through the Ministry chat group on Viber and through several Zoom sessions.

b. Goal 4 – How does the Ministry effectively address scarce skills issues across all civil servants, highlight challenges and way forward for the Ministry to address this issue?

The Ministry understands that the challenge for scarce skills remains, and some measures were introduced through targeted and broad-based retentions of skilled and specialized professionals, such as scarce skills allowance for the scarce skills positions.

As part of the way forward, the Ministry has supported;

- i. The extension of scarce skills allowance to include 8% retention allowance for nurses;
- ii. Ministries re-engagement request to meet the current shortage;
- iii. Recognition of specialized areas and evaluation of roles;
- iv. Training and professional development opportunities made aware and available to all Ministries; and
- v. Establishing of the Fiji Learning Institute for Public Service to collaborate more closely with academic institutions, domestic and foreign development partners to address skill shortages through targeted training initiatives.

c. Is the Ministry thinking of re-introducing the cadet programme as a way forward to address goal 4?

The Ministry of Civil Service introduced an innovative Internship and Graduate Trainee Program Framework in 2023 and then revised in 2024. The programme was designed to usher in a new era of professional development and growth within the civil service. The programme allows for interns to work part-time (20 hours per week), while graduate trainees may work full-time (74 hours per fortnight). Both interns and graduate trainees are eligible to participate in induction programs and work attachments within ministries and departments for a non-extendable period of up to 12 months. The program has been made open to diploma and undergraduate degree holders.

3. Re-engagement of over 55 years

a. How many had left the civil service due to non-vaccination and how many have been re-employed?

Due to non-vaccination, 320 civil servants were terminated from their positions. This group included 85 male officers and 235 female officers, all of whom were directly affected by the 'No Jab, No Job' policy. The decision was part of a broader government mandate aimed at ensuring workplace safety during the pandemic. Despite resistance from some sectors, the policy was enforced uniformly, leading to significant staffing challenges in various departments.

The re-employment of those that were not vaccinated is depended upon the open merit recruitment and selection guidelines where the affected officers have to re-apply for positions in the service. The Ministry have not gathered information on those that have been re-employed. However, it will be able to obtain the information from all Ministries. MCS has managed to re-employ its sole officer that was affected through the open merit recruitment and selection process.

b. For those that have been re-employed, are they taking up positions at the same level as when they left?

The positions vacated by non-vaccinated officers were advertised and subsequently filled. Officers who were terminated due to non-vaccination are eligible to reapply and will be considered for recruitment in accordance with the Open Merit and Recruitment Guidelines. This policy change was announced in 2023 when the Cabinet approved amendments to the Health & Safety (General Workplace Conditions) Regulations 2023. Ministries were advised that there would be no immediate reinstatement for those whose contracts were terminated for non-compliance with the policy at that time. However, former civil servants who were terminated are eligible to apply for vacant, advertised positions in the Civil Service without any restrictions.

4. Civil Service Coordination and Implementation Unit

a. The Committee noted that CSCIU has shifted from CSRM under the Ministry of Finance to MCS. Provide detailed clarification on the transition from reform implementation to the embedding of policy changes that occurred under the reform?

With the change in Ministerial Portfolios in line with the change in Government, the former CIU was shifted to MCS and established as the revived Office Accommodation and Government Housing Unit with effect from April 2023. This was also to complement the reviving of the functions of the former Public Works Department. With MCS, the functions of the Unit have been revised to focus only on the following:

- I. Provision of conducive office accommodation to agencies for effective operations and greater service delivery; and

- II. Adequate housing for civil servants in respective divisions and private stakeholders (under market rate approach –Suva to maximize revenue generation).

The operations and functions including Accounts were successfully transferred from Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Civil Service in consideration of the current Polices/ Financial Legislation in place and staffing to ensure that operations and services are not affected.

The Unit is also assisting respective agencies (Technical/Contract Administration/ Financial aspects) in completing on-going Rehabilitation Projects together with Capital Projects to ensure that projects are completed in accordance with the scope and contractual obligations in place.

5. Scholarship:

a. What are the governing policies for staff who have being offered scholarship to study overseas?

Staff are approved on study leave with pay if the programme is a scarce skills area. For core skills areas, the recipients are given study leave without pay under the Learning and Development Framework. The authorities for study leave lie with the respective Permanent Secretaries.

b. How many of the scholarship recipients are on leave with pay and how many on leave without pay.

For the 2020-2021 period, there were 15 scholarships awarded with pay and 19 were without pay making up the total of 34 long term scholarships awarded. The short-term training by development partners (consists of between 5 days to 1 month training) were all on pay.

c. The Committee noted the increase in numbers of applicants received for the Certificate level Programmes. Is there any arrangement or dialogue between the Ministry and the development partners to indicate the need to offer more scholarship for Certificate Level Programmes?

There are ongoing dialogues to increase the number of short-term trainings between MCS and all the development partners and stakeholders.

d. Provide clarification whether the scholarship statistics in the Annual Report is for the Ministry staff only or for the whole of Government Ministries and Departments?

The figures are for whole of Government Ministries and Departments.

e. In terms of fairness and living no one behind, is the dissemination of information of the scholarship fairly distributed to those civil servants living in rural and maritime areas.

The offers are placed on email blasts through Govnet to all Ministries and Departments and focal points in each Ministry are encouraged to obtain nominations from all divisions including Civil Servants living in rural and maritime areas through their respective Ministries.

f. Does the Ministry develop other forms of submitting applications to ensure that the opportunity is given to everyone?

Applications are sent from each Ministries Training Focal Point Officers to the Ministry of Civil Service. Some development partners such as Singapore and India, require applicants to apply online to the agency portal after which a hard copy is forwarded to MCS for processing.

There are however arrangements in the pipeline to allow interested applicants to apply through the Human Resource Management Information System (HRMIS) portal.

6. Customer Care Call Centre (CCCC)

a. We noted that the CCCC is outsourced to Centrecom. What are the reasons for outsourcing the call centre.

The Call Centre operates from 8am to 12 midnight, 7 days a week extending outside the Government working hours. Hence this was one of the reasons the call center was outsourced. Outsourcing the call center also ensures no biased feedback is recorded regarding any Ministry. Since it was one of the first for whole of Government, it was outsourced to an outside party to get better understanding of its operations before Government can implement a long-term plan on hosting one of its own. The contract with Centrecom commenced in 2022.

b. How many Ministries are covered by Centrecom?

A total of 27 Ministries were covered under the Government Feedback Call Centre.

c. Who pays for the services provided by Centercom?

The payment for the call center is paid by the Ministry of Civil Service from its allocated budget under the Customer Care Centre.

d. Is there a database on the resolution of complaints?

There is data available on the resolution of complaints which is stored in the system and could be extracted as and when required. The data is readily available on the number of complaints or issues which has been closed in its dashboard.

e. Is there a feedback mechanism from the Ministries on the actions taken on complaints?

Each Ministry has a focal point officer who has access to the feedback recorded on the system in relation to their respective Ministry. With the data, they are able to view, action, update and generate reports on the feedback received in relation to their Ministry.

f. Is there an MOU with the Centrecom to cover confidentiality of information?

The Ministry of Civil Service and Centrecom have an agreement in place vetted by the Office of Solicitor General which covers confidentiality of information in Section 9.7 of the agreement.

