

Future Proofing Higher Education in the Pacific with Open and Flexible Learning

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Abstract: Affordable access to higher education is a major challenge for small Pacific island nations. The University of the South Pacific which is owned and governed by twelve island nations in this region plays a special role in meeting this challenge. In its fiftieth year, a few recent developments at USP provide a useful case study for how this challenge can be addressed to provide affordable access to educational opportunity for residents of twelve Pacific Island nations in various stages of development.

The island nations served by the University of the South Pacific are spread over 33 million square kilometers of the Pacific, with several official languages and many more indigenous languages, and use seven distinct currencies. As USP celebrates its fiftieth year in 2018, it has embarked upon two specific initiatives that will enable the university to map out a pathway for the future of education for the next generation and within the context of current and new strategies for the design and implementation of meaningful education throughout the member nations.

These initiatives are the development of a *flexible learning policy* and an *Open Education Resources policy*. Taking pages from the fields of Technology, Education (Learning and Teaching), and Design, these two USP policies seek to “future proof” the university for the next generation and others after that. Being future proofed means being able to stand the test of time in the face of changing contexts and challenges. University policies are most effective when they are designed to withstand and accommodate prospective changes in the educational landscape. These policies reflect agreed-upon principles that will withstand social and political changes. This paper is a commentary on the content of these policy initiatives around flexible learning and open education practices, their values and principles.

Keywords: Open Educational Resources; Flexible Learning; Policy; Pacific; Fiji

Background and Context

The context of this case study is the south west Pacific, which is home to small island nations ranging from coral atolls to small volcanic islands that one could drive around in a day. Till lately, none of these island nations could justifiably afford to set up a tertiary education institution of international strength. The University of the South Pacific was set up in the late 1960s to fill this gap. It is owned and funded by twelve countries of the south west Pacific. This was then, and still is, a unique operation (Latchem, 2018). When it was established in 1968, a fully-fledged university was not viable in any one of these countries. So, it is not surprising that the authors of the Morris Report that



established the university saw the need for USP to be a regional university (Morris, Aitken, Collins, Hughes, & Christie, 1966). As such, the idea of the University of the South Pacific was visionary.

It was visionary not only in its form and structure, but in how learning and teaching would take place at the new university. And from the beginning, it was obvious a single mode of campus-based learning and teaching experience would be inadequate. The new university would need to engage in extra-mural studies although at that time not much was known about teaching extramurally beyond the physical campuses of any university. In the UK there were musings around the Labor government's aspirations for setting up a University of the Air to take advantage of broadcast television. But television would not arrive in the Pacific islands till much later.

The challenges for the new University of the South Pacific were enormous. For starters, it had to be a respectable university—one that would be comparable in form and function to those in neighboring countries such as Australia and New Zealand—and at the same time be different in several ways in order to meet the needs and aspirations of a people who were not accustomed to higher education, let alone formal learning and teaching arrangements in many areas such as Science, Medicine and Engineering. Some form of extramural studies had to be part of the academic plan. Such a plan would enable students in the countries of the region to study without having to set foot on a physical campus, especially in coming to the largest USP campus in Laucala Bay in the Republic of Fiji.

However, this was easier said than done. Faculty who knew how to teach students who were not physically present on campus, or had any experience with teaching such students were few and hard to recruit. So, from the start, it was business as usual. The majority of the faculty who were appointed had a very conventional campus-based education themselves, and no experience in teaching students who were not present on campus and in the classrooms where the staff were located. Thus, the new USP looked like other traditional universities (Latchem, 2018).

It was revolutionary in its aspirations but not radical enough in terms of its form and functions. And after fifty years of teaching and learning at a distance, it may seem at times that the predominant model of teaching and learning at USP is still campus-based and face-to-face. Many students and their teachers want it and believe that it is a superior form of learning and teaching. Furthermore, many see the use of technology, especially online learning technology, as an economic-rationalist argument to save money on staffing and physical infrastructure. This cost-saving rationale—if there is one—should not be the driving force for innovations in developing institutions because they short-change the importance of pedagogy in flexible learning and open education practices (Weller, 2014).

The challenge then for the new university to provide affordable access to higher education was enormous. Business as usual would be inadequate. Teaching and learning needed rethinking and recalibration and needed to include the use of technology and non-traditional approaches to teaching students without a tradition of formal learning, including basic literacy skills in literacy and numeracy.

Getting the Balance Right

How then, could this university serve out its mandate—as was captured by the Morris Report on the founding of the university—to “carry university studies to towns and villages through the Region,

and to promote understanding of and affection for the University in people of distant areas” (Morris, Aitken, Collins, Hughes, & Christie, 1966, p. 5)?

Getting the balance right between a respectable on and off-campus-based learning and teaching experience was a huge challenge for the new university administrators and its academic leaders. So, along with its on-campus classrooms and face-to-face teaching, an extension services unit was set up to “open” up access to learning opportunities and take learning and teaching out to students where they were, in their homes and villages throughout the USP region. The use of the term “extension”, therefore, was very intentional. It suggested an effort by the university to “extend” its learning and teaching operations beyond the physical campuses (Naidu, 2016a).

The concept of “openness” comprises several key dimensions (Naidu, 2016b, p. 1). Firstly, it evokes the idea of *open* access. This is about inclusive and equal access to educational opportunity for all without barriers such as entry qualifications and ability to pay. There would be many such prospective students throughout the Pacific region. Its value principle is that all lives regardless of their social, economic and political conditions, have equal value and that everyone should have access to educational opportunity. Secondly, the concept promotes the idea of *open learning*, which refers to the facility of being able to study at anytime, anywhere and at any pace regardless of one’s conditions. And its value principle is that one should have the freedom and the flexibility to choose the mode, medium, time, place and pace of study. The third dimension of the concept of openness involves the practice of *open scholarship*. This has to do with the release of educational resources under an open license which permits access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others at no cost to the user. And its value principle is that education is a basic need—some might argue it is a right—that should be accessible to all, without barriers such as prerequisite entry qualifications and ability to pay.

Engagement in these kinds of open educational practices is crucial, not just for Pacific Islanders but for all such communities, if we were to achieve freedom, justice and equality for all as suggested by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (Sen, 1999).

For the new University of the South Pacific a serious and systemic engagement with open and flexible approaches to learning and teaching, both on and off the campuses was not an option but a necessity. This involved the adoption of non-traditional approaches, including the use of technology to support the educational transaction, which would be an important and defining characteristic and driven by a need to reach the learner who was traditionally considered “unreachable” (Roberts, 2018, p. 100). After 50 years of this kind of effort, USP has morphed into a respectable comprehensive institution that is widely known and highly regarded for its leadership in *open, flexible and distance learning* (Chandra, 2018).

Open, Flexible and Distance Learning at USP

Building on this track record and reputation, and on its 50th year of operation, USP embarked on a progressive agenda designed to map out the future of learning and teaching for the next generation of Pacific Islanders. This has comprised the development of two new policies to drive this agenda. The first of these policies is around the university’s engagement with flexible learning, and the second one is around its adoption of Open Educational Resources in learning and teaching.

Part of the imperative for the development of the flexible learning policy arose out of USP's search for institutional accreditation by WSCUC (Western Association Senior College and University Commission in the United States), a regional accrediting agency that was set up for the purposes of accrediting senior colleges and universities throughout California, Hawaii, and the Pacific. WSCUC is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, and by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation as a reliable authority concerning the quality of education provided by member institutions of higher education offering the associate degree, baccalaureate degree and post-baccalaureate degrees.

The development of the Flexible Learning Policy was needed to demonstrate to WSCUC that the University of the South Pacific approaches open, flexible and distance learning very rigorously and systematically. An initial draft of this policy was developed based on the Commission's criteria for best practices in open, flexible and distance learning and work shopped with key stakeholders across the university, including teaching staff, administrators and students. Subsequent drafts of the policy were then progressed through the Teaching Quality Committee and the Academic Senate for their approval. These are academic governance committees of the university with representation from the academic and student communities. After further revisions based on feedback from these committees, the document was revised and submitted for formatting by the Secretariat before it was formally adopted by the University Council which is the highest governing body of the university.

The Open Educational Resources (OER) Policy was not directly tied to the WSCUC accreditation process, although it helped it. The University of the South Pacific had been exploring the opportunities presented by OER for some time and the development of the OER Policy was a result of that effort. A draft of this policy was developed through the agency of the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver. A draft of this policy was developed in workshops with key stakeholders at the university and then progressed through the Teaching Quality Committee and the Academic Senate for their approval. Following further revisions based on feedback from these committees the document was revised and submitted for formatting by the Council Secretariat and legal vetting before formal adoption by the University Council.

While the development of these policies comprises a significant step towards future proofing learning and teaching at the university, their adoption and integration requires buy-in by stakeholders. And since their adoption, workshops and consultations have been held with students and staff across the breadth of the university to educate the university community on the implications of these policies for their work. This is an ongoing effort and one that is critical to the success of the adoption and integration of these policies into existing institutional choreographies.

Adoption of these two policies have the potential to "future proof" learning and teaching at the university and set it on a path to even greater excellence unmatched by its competitors because they have been developed within the scope of the value principles shared among the twelve nations. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss in depth the developing of these policies, but rather to focus on the content of these policy directions and how they are being directed at "future proofing" both flexible learning and the integration of Open Educational Resources in learning and teaching at the university.

Open and flexible learning is not a binary construct (Nascimbeni, Burgos, Campbell, & Tabacco, in press). They are best seen as learning experiences, and environments that exist on a continuum with varying degrees of openness and flexibility embedded in them depending upon their educational and legislative contexts, as well as the perceptions and practices of staff towards these concepts (Cronin, 2017). Not all learning experiences and environments will need the same level of openness and flexibility. In some educational contexts a much greater degree of openness and flexibility is possible, while in others, such as areas where access to equipment and related infrastructure is required, this will not be the case.

The rest of this paper describes these two new initiatives in detail to show how these have been conceptualized, developed and implemented to address the challenge posed by the lack of affordable access to higher educational opportunities in the Pacific region. Lessons learned from this effort should be of use to regions facing similar societal challenges.

The Flexible Learning Policy

This policy provides the parameters for the adoption and integration of flexible learning and teaching strategies at the University of the South Pacific that are suitably aligned with its mission and its regional and distributed nature. (See: <https://policylib.usp.ac.fj/form.categorydetails.php?id=1>.)

Definitions of Flexible Learning

Flexible learning is a state of being in which learning and teaching is increasingly freed from the limitations of the *time*, *place* and *pace* of study (see Naidu, 2017, p. 1). But this kind of flexibility does not end there. For learners, flexibility in learning may include choices in relation to entry and exit points, selection of learning activities, assessment tasks and educational resources in return for different kinds of credit and costs. And for the teachers it can involve choices in relation to the allocation of their time and the mode and methods of communication with learners as well as the educational institution. As such flexible learning, in itself, is not a mode of study. Flexibility in learning and teaching is a value principle, much like diversity or equality is in education and society more generally. Flexibility in learning and teaching is relevant in any mode of study including campus-based face-to-face educational transactions.

The adoption of *flexible learning* is central to the ethos and culture of USP. Its distributed nature required the university to engage in flexible learning which it has done since its establishment, with the need for flexible approaches to learning and teaching at USP growing in order to open up access to further enrich the educational experience of students beyond its conventional campus-based educational operations.

In the early days of this initiative, flexible learning opportunities at the university went by the name of *extension studies*, suggesting an effort by the university to extend credit bearing learning and teaching opportunities beyond the boundaries of its physical campuses. In the early days of this operation, the printed technology and the postal mail service formed the backbone of this educational transaction. And as information and communications technologies including electronic mail began to supersede the use of print and postal mail, the concept of written correspondence via the postal service was no longer an adequate descriptor of this educational transaction that was taking place.

Around the dawn of the 1980s, distance education emerged as a term that better captured the nature of this learning and teaching transaction away from the physical campuses. But that term had issues as well, as an accurate descriptor of this activity, as the concept of distance implied a physical separation, when that was not always the case. There were learners who were living *in situ* and on campuses but, for various reasons, opted to study in flexible ways. Some of the reasons for this had to do with being able to take up courses which might not have been offered at the time students needed or wanted to take them. Other reasons included the opportunity to take on additional courses and in doing so speeding up the duration of their study programs. And then there was also the opportunity to take advantage of a far better set of study materials that was becoming symptomatic of distance learning, due to its adoption of instructional design principles and rigorous course team processes.

So as many more options for engaging in the flexible learning experience became available to learners and teachers, and as students chose to take advantage of the opportunities that these choices afforded, the nature of this nontraditional educational transaction changed as well. And depending on its emphasis, this form of learning and teaching activity was labeled variously as *online learning*, *e-learning*, *blended learning*, *distributed learning*, and *disaggregated learning*.

- *Online and e-learning* are characterized as such because of the technology they adopt as part of the learning and teaching transaction. *Online learning* is learning while being connected synchronously and/or asynchronously, while *e-learning* is learning with the use of electronic tools.
- *Blended learning*, also referred to as hybrid learning is about blending modes of study such as online learning with periods of face-to-face residential learning and teaching or printed study packages as is the case at USP.
- *Distributed learning* is when learners and teachers are operating while distributed over a virtual and/or physical network of resources, and learning and teaching opportunities.
- *Disaggregated learning* reflects the changing role of the teacher in this new and evolving learning and teaching space with various aspects of the learning and teaching transaction devolved to various parts and parties, and not confined to the form and function of subject matter expert(s).

The determination of the nature and levels of flexibility in learning and teaching in a given context depends on several interacting variables, such as the nature of the subject matter, the level of study, location of students and teachers, their readiness for flexible learning including their access to technologies and the necessary infrastructure. One size or approach to flexible learning does not, and will not, fit all learners, teachers or disciplines. There will be a need for different approaches to learning and teaching, with different levels of flexibility, structure and guidance for different cohorts and learning contexts.

Role of the Center for Flexible Learning

The Center for Flexible Learning (CFL) plays a critical role in all of these activities. (See: <https://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=19192>). The role of the CFL in providing leadership and direction to the university in these areas is pivotal and it involves:

- Development of institutional policies in flexible and technology-enhanced learning, and in the development and adoption and integration of OER in learning and teaching at the university;

- Hosting a plethora of technologies to support the adoption and integration of flexible and technology-enhanced learning and teaching, and open educational resources at the university;
- Orientation and onboarding of staff and students in these technologies for effective and efficient use;
- Leadership and direction in the conversion and revision of courses and programs for online and flexible learning to meet USP Strategic Plan KPIs;
- Nurturing of awareness in the university community about flexible and technology-enhanced learning and teaching, and Open Educational Resources and their imperatives for teaching and learning;
- Working with staff initially on the adoption of open textbooks and other OER in their courses;
- Collection and analysis of data on the behaviors and perceptions of students and staff of digital technologies in order to inform and promote excellent practices in a technologically enhanced educational environment.
- Leading and promoting research and scholarship in learning and teaching generally, and more specifically into flexible and technology-enhanced learning and teaching, and open educational practices towards meeting the relevant USP Strategic Plan KPIs.

Dimensions of Flexibility

A useful approach to embedding flexibility is to see it in relation to how, and to what extent flexibility is being integrated in leveraging key dimensions of learning and teaching, and these are as follows:

1. *Learning experience design*: This is about the design and development of productive learning experiences so that each learner is able to make the most of the learning opportunities they afford.
2. *Learner-content engagement*: This is about learners' engagement and interaction with the subject matter in ways that suit individuals, their styles and approaches to studying and its time, place and pace.
3. *Learner-teacher engagement*: This is about choices learners have in relation to the mode and method of their engagement and interaction with their teachers and tutors.
4. *Learner-learner engagement*: This is about choices learners have in relation to the mode and method of their engagement and interaction with their peers in small and large groups, and in offline and online educational settings.
5. *Learner engagement with the learning environment*: This is about adaptable access, interaction and engagement with the learning environment (such as with mobile devices, Wi-Fi access and innovative use of study space).
6. *Learner engagement with assessment activities*: This is about choices learners have in relation to the fulfillment of their assessment requirements.
7. *Learner engagement with feedback*: This is about choices learners have in relation to access to feedback on their learning and assessment activities.
8. *Learner engagement with the institution*: This is about choices learners have in relation to their engagement with the services of the educational institution.

Parameters of Flexible Learning

The flexible learning policy offers guidelines for the adoption and integration of flexible learning and teaching strategies at USP that are suitably aligned with its learning and teaching policy and its regional and distributed nature. Nothing in the policy implies that teaching and learning exists in a binary form (i.e., face-to-face or flexible forms), or that any model of educational transaction at the university is in any way less adequate than another. The goal is about getting the balance right between the degree of structure and guidance on the one hand, and openness and flexibility on the other, in order to promote and achieve effective, efficient and engaging learning and teaching. The aim is to move from a position of baseline adoption of flexibility in learning and teaching, to aspirational goals and targets along the following parameters.

Fit with Mission

The multi-national nature of USP requires that flexible learning is central to its mission, goals, operations and administrative structure. As such flexible learning is the core business of the University of the South Pacific. It is something that the university engages in as an integral part of its teaching and learning activities, and not in addition to its campus-based operations. Flexible learning is in fact, very much a part of its campus-based activities.

In this regard, then, the planning and scheduling of flexible learning rests squarely with the Colleges (Faculties) and Schools of the University as part of their normal operations. Flexible learning and teaching are, therefore, the responsibility of the core faculty and not adjunct faculty. As such, the teaching staff in the Colleges and Schools are required to integrate flexibility in their core teaching and learning activities. Colleges and Schools are required to progressively adopt digital technologies, such as online learning management systems and lecture capture tools, to carry the educational content and engage with learners. And as part of this, online learning should be increasingly rolled out to promote appropriate levels of flexibility in relation to the time, place and pace of student learning activities and experiences across all modes of education at the university, including residential face-to-face education on campus.

Connection to the Institution

The policy enables and encourages USP's plans for developing, sustaining, and expanding online learning to be integrated into its regular planning process. As such, learning and teaching transactions at the university shall be designed to offer students, regardless of their physical location, appropriate levels of flexibility in relation to the time, pace and place of their studies. Students of the university, will be able to make choices in relation to their studies regardless of their physical location and circumstances. And students choosing to study in a manner, time and place that suits them best will have access to all the usual support services afforded by the campuses of the university. These services will include, apart from library services, places for private study and face-to-face teaching that might be offered or necessary. The integration of flexible learning will be closely aligned with School and Faculty plans for teaching and learning in its various disciplines. And their design and development will be carried out through a rigorous course-team process that is adopted by all university programs and courses with the support of the staff and resources of the Center for Flexible Learning.

Quality of the Infrastructure

The policy assures the integrity of USP's engagement with flexible learning, with the provision of appropriate infrastructure. While flexible learning is NOT synonymous with online education, online learning tools and technologies will increasingly serve to provide the infrastructure for flexible learning as the adoption of online learning expands at the university.

Currently, the backbone of this infrastructure is MOODLE (which is an open source online learning management system) that supports this form of learning and teaching transaction. Any additional teaching support is provided to the students from their local campus within the country using a wide variety of strategies, including face-to-face teaching, and satellite-based, audio-conferencing with staff from the Laucala Campus (USP's main campus in Suva). USP has been a pioneer in the use of many of these methods, especially in the use of satellite-based, audio-teleconferencing in teaching and learning as part of its flexible learning operations, as well as in the design and development of print-based course packages to support this. The goal of increasing flexible learning opportunities is to offer students in the USP region, who are unable to attend a physical campus in their own country or elsewhere, opportunities to continue to pursue their studies. Academic integrity in all of these matters is governed by a single set of policies for teaching and learning at the university. And the role of the regional campuses and the Campus Directors is crucial in their execution at the local level to ensure that the integrity of the operation is assured.

Support Services for Flexible Learning

The policy assures that USP provides effective student and academic services to support students enrolled in on-line learning offerings. Because of the practice of flexible learning as a mainstream learning and teaching activity at the university, all students who are studying in any mode have full access to all the all core student support services of the university. The local campus and its resources provide any additional support required by those not at the Laucala Campus and may include face-to-face teaching, academic advisement, study space and library support services. Orientation and onboarding programs for students on *Learning How to Learn Online*, are developed and strengthened as the adoption of online education expands in educational programs in the Colleges and Schools. These initiatives include, among other things, the skilling of students in the promotion of learner interaction with the educational organization and its services, using a wide range of ways irrespective of their location or physical capabilities.

Flexible Learning Faculty

The policy gives the appropriately qualified faculty the responsibility and support for implementing the on-line learning curricula and assessing students' success in achieving the on-line learning goals. Flexible learning is, unequivocally, the responsibility of the core faculty members in the Colleges and Schools at the University of the South Pacific. Faculty in the Colleges and Schools are selected and appointed from the outset on the premise that they will engage in flexible learning and teaching at the university. And upon their appointment, all faculty have access to a wide range of support services in relation to flexible learning, such as orientation and onboarding programs on *Learning How to Teach Online*, from within the Colleges and Schools, and from central support services such as the University Library and the Center for Flexible Learning. A post-graduate certificate in tertiary teaching (which

covers contemporary issues in teaching and learning in higher education contexts) is offered by the university as a mandatory requirement for continuing employment for all faculty at the university.

Flexible Learning Curriculum

The policy gives appropriately qualified faculty the responsibility and support for the design and development of the online learning curricula and assessing students' success in achieving the learning goals. The flexible learning curriculum at the university is developed from the same syllabi that is used to develop courses and programs that are offered in the face-to-face mode on campus. The delivery of these courses and programs in flexible modes is orchestrated by the Schools responsible with the help of the university infrastructure and its support services. These include the Center for Flexible Learning, the University Library and IT Services, and the regional campus network.

As such, the curriculum of flexible learning and teaching in the Colleges and Schools have undergone a level of rigor using a course team approach in its design and development, as a result of which its quality will be equal to, or better than, that of exemplary practices in comparable courses and programs offered F2F on campus and *in situ*.

Orientation and onboarding programs for staff on *Learning How to Teach Online* is developed and strengthened to support this kind of activity as the adoption of flexible and online learning expands across programs in Colleges and Schools. These initiatives include skilling of staff in the:

1. Promotion of learner interaction with their teachers using a wide variety of modes and methods of communication, both offline and online.
2. Promotion of learner interaction with the subject matter using a wide variety of active learning strategies.
3. Promotion of student peer interaction with the adoption of a wide variety of strategies in small and large groups, and in both offline and online educational settings.
4. Use of synchronous as well as asynchronous technologies to support effective, efficient and engaging learning and teaching.
5. Design and adoption of flexible approaches to the assessment of learning outcomes.
6. Design and use of flexible approaches in the provision of feedback to learners on their learning and assessment activities.

Learning Analytics

As flexible learning forms part of mainstream educational processes at the university, the collection of a wide variety of data on student retention, their progression and graduation, is embedded in the university's core planning, development and quality assurance processes. This kind of analytics includes monitoring of learner and learning behaviors, data warehousing, and working with big data, building models and predicting trends, and reporting to improve learning and teaching at the university as well as its business processes. USP students, many of whom are part-time students with families and jobs to sustain, may have a higher tendency to withdraw, or fail to persist with their course of study for very personal reasons, which are not related to their educational programs. For this reason alone, the university takes very seriously the gathering of intelligence on all of its learners

in order to ensure that the educational opportunities it affords, more than adequately meets their needs.

Valid Assessment of Student Learning

The policy assures that that assessment is valid by demanding: (1) a secure login and password code, (2) proctored examinations, (3) implementation of any new technologies or practices that are effective in verifying student identification. Assessment of learning outcomes regardless of the mode of learning and teaching at USP follow the requirements and standards that have been developed by the core faculty in the Colleges and Schools and adopted at the university. These requirements and standards shall be uniform and not vary across different courses regardless of the degree of flexibility they may integrate as part of the learning and teaching transaction in any mode of study. All formal course examinations taken by students, as part of any mode of study, are proctored and taken in person at the local campus. Course work and assessment undertaken and/or submitted online should be authenticated with a variety of strategies, procedures and processes, including tools such as Turnitin, to ensure that all online learning activities are valid and undertaken by a legitimately registered student.

Supporting Flexible Learning

The policy demands that all support arrangements with outside vendors conform to existing USP policy. The university may enter into formal agreements with providers of IT and related technologies, as well as other educational resources in order to support a high-quality educational experience for all its students and faculty. These contracts are negotiated and entered into, through existing offices of the university, including its legal services.

Quality Assurance for Flexible Learning

The policy demands that USP evaluates the effectiveness of its flexible learning programs and uses the results to improve its effectiveness and efficiency. The evaluation of the student flexible learning experience (of which distance education is a part) comprises an integral component of the university's quality assurance processes and procedures. This comprises a wide range of strategies using both online and off-line tools for routinely collecting data on all aspects of the student study experience and its reporting and use in the review and revision of courses, and learning and teaching at the university. Any discrepancies in the findings for different cohorts and courses is dealt with and addressed as part of routine reporting on quality assurance procedures and processes at the university and in its Colleges and Schools.

The Open Educational Resources Policy

The purpose of the *Open Educational Resources Policy* is to provide direction in the adoption of Open Educational Resources in order to increase affordable access to high quality teaching and learning at the university. (See: <https://policylib.usp.ac.fj/form.readdoc.php?id=736>).

Definitions and Principles

Open Educational Resources are teaching, learning and research materials that are available in the public domain or offered with an open license (Mishra, 2017). As such they are free for reuse, revision, remixing and redistribution without further permissions from its copyright holder. Its value

proposition is that education is a basic need (and some might argue a human right), that should be accessible to all. These values are congruent with Pacific Islander beliefs in *relationship*, *reciprocity* and *respect* as vehicles for strengthening communities in the region with the sharing of knowledge and resources equitably. Their adoption strengthens USP's commitment to open and flexible learning broadly.

Objectives of the Policy

The objectives of this policy are foremost, to increase access to learning and teaching resources as widely and openly as possible. Increased access to open educational resources has the potential to empower learners, transform pedagogical practices, optimize cost efficiencies, and foster collaboration and partnership in the creation and adoption of OER nationally and regionally. The OER policy provides guidelines for the selection, adaptation as well as the development of new educational resources to be released as OER. This includes capacity-building of staff engaged in the activity, including recognition and rewards for staff for the development, acquisition and adaptation of OER.

OER Policy Guidelines

Policy Directions

The OER policy stipulates, at the outset, that OER are to be preferred in the design and development of teaching and learning materials at USP. And that in recognition of the potential of OER to widen access to, and improve the quality of, learning and teaching at all levels, the production and use of OER is a matter of priority at USP.

Copyright and Licensing

All teaching and learning resources developed by USP staff members, therefore, are shared with an open license to permit their reuse, revision, remix, and redistribution by others. The university adopts the most current Creative Commons license for its resources. (See this URL). And a detailed guide to open licensing is made available to assist and determine how staff wish to share their teaching and learning resources.

The licensing of material developed in collaboration with others beyond USP, is in accordance with the terms and conditions stated in the agreement of the collaboration. Retrospective release of teaching and learning materials already published by the university takes place in a phased manner following the review of copyright on each item. Exceptions to open licensing rests with the Vice-Chancellor and President. The university reserves the rights not to share resources that may be commercially viable.

Technology and Support

The university will set up a mechanism for the creation of OER with open source software and also setup an open repository for sharing of OER developed by the university. This repository will be developed using an appropriate open source software, and it is managed by the university library which will also develop an appropriate workflow mechanism as well as metadata structure for this purpose.

Capacity Building and Professional Development

The Center for Flexible Learning is the focal point for providing support to staff and students including capacity building and their professional development in the integration of OER in teaching and learning. Staff engaged in the adoption and creation of OER will be suitably recognized as part of the Quality of Teaching and Quality of Research criteria and policies at the university. Research on the production, use and re-contextualization of OER and its impacts will be encouraged across the university. Students will also be encouraged to use OER and become producers of OER. And all student work should follow accepted guidelines for scholarly work.

Quality Assurance

To ensure high standards and quality, all courses developed using OER will follow USP's standard QA processes. Individual learning resources created by staff should not require further review prior to uploading to the OER repository. However, the quality of all such contributions will be the responsibility of its creator(s). The university library should develop guidelines for formats, metadata, etc., to facilitate the sharing of resources with, and protect the university brand and identity.

Liability and Disclaimers

The OER policy applies to all staff and students of the USP and is applicable to all types of educational resources released in physical or electronic format. The policy does not override governance related to documents such as policies, trademarks, logo, patents, and personal information.

License Declaration

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Implications of this Case Study

Institutions in developing contexts are continuously being challenged to rethink and reform their learning and teaching operations in order to provide affordable access to higher education to a larger percentage of their nation's population. These institutions often tend to look at Western models and

their systems and processes for guidance in areas where they are being challenged. At USP these challenges include affordable access to learning opportunities. Although open, online and flexible learning has been touted as the classic disruptive innovation (Christensen, & Eyring, 2012), USP has seen it not as a disruption, but as an accommodation and resulting strategy for its unique regional operation.

This case study illustrates how with the development of innovative policies and procedures around the themes of “openness” and “flexibility”, USP is “future proofing” learning and teaching at the university to be able to address expectations and competing demands for its resources and services in a complex socio-political regional context. These policies are deeply grounded in universal values of *access, equity, and openness* which are consistent with Pacific Islander values of *relationship, reciprocity, and respect*. In the same manner, higher education institutions in other developing nations must be driven by universal values that are consistent with local and national values. Finding these universal values and agreeing upon them is a necessary prerequisite to “future proofing” a next-generation university.

Failure to rethink and reform the learning and teaching operation and fashion it in ways to meet the challenge of affordable access to educational opportunity in the Pacific will run the risk of labelling USP as an elitist institution that is not fit for its purpose. This fitness for purpose is the goal of all higher institutions and should be especially important in developing nations.

This case study also illustrates how a policy can be developed and implemented that assures that the learning materials developed by and for the institution are made available at a minimal cost. The Open Educational Resources policy is proactive in assuring that students have the best instructional materials at little or no cost to them. This is a critical component of affordable access to higher education.

Additionally, this case study also acknowledges the importance of both administrative support as well as technical support in the success of “future proofing” the university. Although USP was not deliberately founded as an open university, it has been thrust into that role over the years as a response to meeting the needs of the region it serves. Because of the acknowledgement of the innovative spirit within the design, development and implementation of its curriculum, USP has been able to organize itself to champion innovation with the support of both its management and technical teams.

At USP, a critical component of this support is provided by the *Center for Flexible Learning* which provides infrastructure support as well as conceptual leadership and direction in open, flexible and technology-enhanced learning as there are strong arguments in favor of centers of excellence such as these to support teaching and learning in higher education institutions (Roberts, 2013). However, the successful “future proofing” of a developing institution will involve more than the necessary prerequisite administrative infrastructure. For higher education institutions in developing contexts, there must be monetary support for the development of a cohort of expertise that will support the technology and the pedagogy similar to that provided by the *Center for Flexible Learning* at USP.

As a result of this support, flexible learning is now the main game at USP as opposed to being a side show (Naidu, 2016a). USP offers a wide range of courses and programs that students from anywhere in the world can take. These courses and programs can be tailored to meet specific government

requests that include the use of cohort-based learning, blended and online learning to ensure that students and those who are already in the workforce, such as teachers and others, can take them without leaving their jobs, as has been done in countries such as Samoa and Tonga.

USP is developing substantial expertise in the design, development, adoption and integration of open educational resources in its teaching and learning and is able to help others. Notable initiatives comprise the conversion of courses using Open Educational Resources, and for online and flexible learning as a key performance indicator in the university's Strategic Plan. This has required re-engineering of workloads in the *Centre for Flexible Learning* to champion and provide direction to this work which has included the development of open textbooks, adoption and integration of Open Educational Resources, development of an OER repository, and the development of MOOCs in areas of USP's strength, such as climate change, marine sciences, and Pacific studies.

The adoption of Open Educational Resources has the potential to significantly mitigate the exorbitant costs of textbooks and related reference material in the region and therefore make education affordable for Pacific Islanders. This, along with the integration of flexible approaches to learning and teaching, the next generation of USP students can expect improved access to learning opportunities that will suit not only their local needs but also their aspirations to reach beyond the boundaries of their region. The university is taking strong steps to signal its role in future-proofing learning and teaching in the region. These policy directions help map out this strategy and they can be adopted not only among the twelve member-nations of USP, but also among collaborating institutions worldwide.

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