



Adaptable shipping questions: South Pacific University case

Olivia Baxter[†], Yasar Kaseeb Gaber[‡]

[†] City Colleges of Chicago-Harry S Truman College, Chicago, USA

[‡] City Colleges of Chicago-Harry S Truman College, Chicago, USA

Paper type: Research article

Journal ISSN: 2692-2800

Abstract

Flexible delivery has become an essential model for teaching and learning as its methods are closely aligned to the constructivist theories catering for diverse learners' needs and lifestyles. In the South Pacific, where islands are geographical scattered over the vast areas of the world's largest ocean, development, delivery, evaluation and communication of the flexibly delivered courses remain problematic.

This paper focuses on the problems, challenges and barriers of offering flexibly delivered courses in the Pacific from the context of the University of the South Pacific, a leading premier regional university serving 12 island nations in the Pacific. It explores the following problematic issues, (a) inflexible curriculum, (b) access to support services, (c) level of infrastructure, and (d) ICT developments, and proposes possible solutions to these issues.

Keywords: Flexible delivery, flexible learning, flexibly delivered course, distance and flexible learning, distance and flexible learners, University of the South Pacific, ICT.

Introduction

Flexible delivery of education has become pervasive augmenting the ever growing need of perpetual just in time and lifelong learning. Contrary to the traditional methods of learning and teaching, flexible delivery offers learners with a myriad of choices as to how they want their learning experiences to occur. These choices are often designed to cater for diverse learning styles, preferences and strategies. The term flexible delivery and flexible learning have been used interchangeably. George and Luke (1995) for example, describes flexible delivery "promoting deep approaches to learning by purposefully selecting forms of delivery which are multi-dimensional" (p. 2) whilst Nunan (1996) considers flexible delivery "to mean the same thing as increasing flexibility in learning". (p. 2). According to Norman and Littlejohn (2005), flexible delivery is used synonymously with other approaches including open learning, distance learning and e-learning. Since flexible delivery and learning has several permutations and interpretations, Casey and Wilson (2005) suggests a contextual definition can be derived from answering the questions of "who is asking? and for whom the delivery is flexible?" (p. 5). Furthermore, they described that the five main dimensions of measuring flexibility are "time, content, entry requirements, instructional approaches and resources, and delivery and logistics" (Casey & Wilson, 2005, p.6).



This paper considers flexible delivery as the vehicle for achieving flexible learning; self-directed learning anytime and anywhere. This paper focuses on the problems, challenges and barriers of offering flexibly delivered courses in the Pacific from the context of the University of the South Pacific, a leading premier regional university serving 12 island nations in the Pacific. It explores the following problematic issues, (a) inflexible curriculum, (b) access to support services, (c) level of infrastructure, and (d) ICT developments, and proposes possible solutions to these issues.

The University of the South Pacific and Distance and Flexible Education

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is a regional university founded in 1969 to serve twelve Pacific island nations (Cook Is., Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Is., Nauru, Niue, Solomon Is., Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Samoa). It has 14 regional campuses around the Pacific. USP is regional in the core components of its organizational structure: financial, physical, academic, and political as the twelve Pacific island nations which are, as proprietors, exercise collective governance (Matthewson, 1994).

USP began offering distance education in 1971. In 2006, 340 of the USP's 763 courses were available through distance and flexible delivery mode, with an institutional goal of having all the courses offered through the distance and flexible delivery mode by 2010 (Evans & Hazelman, 2006). 42% of USP's 22,000 students are distance and flexible learning students spread across the 12 island nations (Whelan, 2008). USP uses a range of media such as print materials, online learning management systems (Moodle), audio/audiographics and video conferencing, audio/video tapes, CDROMS and DVDs for the delivery of distance and flexible courses. Print materials are widely used as the most robust form of delivery however there has been gradual increases in the use of online learning management systems (from 6 web enhanced courses in 2001 to about 70 courses in 2007).

The USP member island nations are geographically dispersed, culturally, linguistically and economically diverse, spanning across 33 million square kilometres and four time zones. The total population within this area is less than 1.5 million and is situated in countries which "range from groups of small coral atolls, to one island countries and volcanic groups of islands and within its four major ethnic groups, Melanesian, Micronesian, Polynesian and Indian, there are 265 distinct languages and 60 distinct cultures prevalent" (Matthewson, 1994).

Many island communities are rural, remote and sparsely populated with traditional societies blending the indigenous cultural norms with forces of modernisation and development (Rao, 2007). Delivery of flexible learning courses for this community poses its own problems, challenges and barriers that are unique in its nature.

Problems and Solutions

The paper will focus on 4 major problematic issues of flexible delivery in the Pacific, (a) inflexible curriculum, (b) access to support services, (c) level of infrastructure, and (d) ICT developments. For each issue, the paper tries to propose solutions that can be used or already in use by USP for its flexible delivery.

The first issue is the inflexible curriculum. There has been an emphasis on the part of the USP's distance and flexible delivery course development teams over the years to contextualise flexible delivery learning materials to suit the needs of the Pacific learners. However, the magnitude of the diversity and differences in the environment, 'culture, values, linguistics and language proficiencies' (Rao, 2007) among the Pacific distance learners has meant only so much can be done. English is either the second or third language for most of the Pacific learners but yet it remains the principle language of instruction in USP. There is also the problem of the differences in the socio-economic and socio-cultural activities among the twelve member nations. Of particular interest is the difference in the reception of curricula that have been designed for a non-specific, generic 'global' audience as compared to curricula with the learner's specific cultural context in mind, for example, each country has their own currency therefore it is highly disengaging and superficial to use just one country's currency in the course curriculum of flexibly delivered courses. This situation even further worsened when trying to use vocabularies, symbols, icons, images and examples which are irrelevant, or sacred or taboo in one island nation while it is 'normal' in other island nations.



Bringing flexibility in the curriculum (or at least fit the majority) is even more difficult due to the diverse educational systems and epistemologies prevalent in the twelve USP member countries. This has led to “individual differences in the cognitive style and instructional preferences (i.e their disposition towards particular aspects of the learning environment)” (Smith & Smith, 2004) among the Pacific learners. For instance, Gold, Swann & Chief (2002) describe Pacific learning style to be “learning by doing...learning in real life situations and understanding for specific contexts” and “reading and writing are difficult for Pacific island learners for whom print as a medium of information and instruction is culturally and relatively new.”

In a study by Bolobola and Wah (cited in Wah & Tuisawau, 2001), it was found that a substantial percentage (43%) of women from Cook Islands who withdrew from their distance studies, cited “heavy course workload”, “difficult course content” and “family commitments” as reasons for withdrawing. This questioned the flexibility of the USP distance courses and whether they take into account the demands of large extended families (a norm in Pacific island communities).

The inflexibility in the curriculum is also due to the fact that instructors are academics but not trained teachers who still largely believe that traditional education (face to face delivery) is ideal and considers flexible delivery as “a second best alternative”. They still lack the pedagogical methodologies and experiences for effective and contextualised flexible delivery of education.

Working forward for a solution to deal with inflexible curriculum would require extensive planning and radical redesign of rudimentary course material production process for flexible delivery. For planning for learner autonomy, a learner profiler needs to be established so that the cohort of the learner needs and diversities can be addressed in respective flexible courses. Using blended delivery approach by including several delivery media in a flexible course would enable learners with cognitive based personalisation in learning. A course could include print components supported by audio/video components, however this would mean increase in cost and this would require more time for planning, preproduction and production given the fact that a new course in USP is developed within 8 months for flexible delivery. Furthermore, the diverse range of language skills must be factored into curriculum design. The use of locally-relevant learning materials, localized content and examples, local languages rather than English in the course would bring about more contextualised relevant curriculum. For example, Whelan (2008) survey found that localising the learning management system’s interface into the first language (or second) would provide additional support for online learners. (p. 24).

This paper agrees with Hall (1996) that the change to a flexible learning multipoint/multimode philosophy should be accompanied by the transformation in the roles of “faculty, students, administrators, college campuses and many non-formal learning sites – new roles for distance and flexible education”. (p. 31). USP needs to provide more training in educational design for flexible delivery to its academics so that course materials can be produced with sound pedagogies. USP also needs to conduct awareness workshops and training for these academics to promote the use of open educational resources (OER) such as MERLOT and OpenCourseWare.

The second issue is the access to support services. Although USP has 14 regional campuses and various centres/study-centres in the twelve USP member islands, some of the distance and flexible learners have been at disadvantage because they live in outer islands, have transportation and communication problems and thus have no or little access to support services available to them. Wah and Tuisawau (2001) reported that the lack of proper support system as one of the reasons for high failure rate of USP’s distance and flexible students.

Finding quality trained local tutors for the larger campuses have been relatively easy, but for smaller campuses there are still difficulties. Evans and Hazelman (2006) further explain that even “maintaining the services of qualified local tutors can be problematic because of the temporary and part-time nature of the employment offered to them”. And an added complication is that due to cost issues, campuses need to have five or more students enrolled in order to ensure a local tutor for a distance or flexibly delivered course.

The university (USP) also offers video/audio conferencing and satellite tutorials for its distance and flexible learners. Since the main university campus is based in Suva (Fiji), thus all audio/video lectures and satellite tutorials are conducted in Fiji date and time. Therefore there is a tendency that learners living in different time zones have to adjust themselves according to Fiji date and time (which simply defeats the notions of anytime learning). For instance when a Monday morning lecture takes place in Fiji, it is still Sunday in Samoa and Cook Islands.

In a bid to improve the quality of the support services, USP have embarked on infrastructure developments across all its campuses, centres and study-centres. It is seeking to establish more centres in the outer islands. USP have also successfully implemented the “Success@USP” orientation project which bundles essential support services in a package that is handed out to all its distance and flexible learners as part of their course materials. The problem of accessing local tutors is anticipated to be solved through the mainstreaming of online course management systems so distance and flexible learners can have ready access to course tutors, instructors, tutorials and lectures. However, connectivity is another issue.

The third issue is the level of infrastructure.

The varying levels and lack of infrastructure such as proper transportation, communication and electricity in the twelve USP member islands poses problems for flexible delivery in the region. Most of the Pacific island nations largely have “aid-dependent” or “aid-augmented” economies (Matthewson, 1994). Transportation systems between islands and countries range from canoes to 747s. The lack of proper roads in many parts of the Pacific islands means the distance and flexible learners have to travel far distances to access local support services at a USP campus or centre. This leads to learners having limited or no access to local support services. For instance, in Samoa, learners are faced with transportation problems when the bus stops services at 4.30pm and most classes are scheduled at 5pm. Communication systems among the twelve island nations vary from none to standard and to high-tech technologies. For example, while some USP campuses and centres enjoy live satellite tutorials, the communication infrastructure in Samoa has been such that the communication has been through high frequency (HF) radio.

Because of the frailties of the communication and transportation systems distance and flexible learners of USP are faced with problems such as: (a) problems in successful enrolments, (b) problems in accessing/receiving course materials on time, (c) problems with communicating and interacting with course instructors and fellow peers, (d) delays in feedbacks and results, and (e) problems in accessing relevant information and support services. On the other hand, the problem of infrastructure hinders USP in any efforts to deliver new and innovative practices in distance and flexible delivery such as the mainstreaming of online learning management systems.

One of the ways to work around the problem of the levels of infrastructure is for USP to push forward for more partnerships or “cross-sectoral mergers” (Wah & Tuisawau, 2001). It needs to involve more of corporate organisations, private enterprises, non governmental organizations and donor agencies to work towards the development of infrastructure across the region. For example, the university had work closely with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) from 2001 to 2005 to use technology for the delivery and support of distance and flexible learning courses. JICA assisted USP in implementing an online course management system (WebCT), provided training in online instructional designing, donated computers to various regional campuses and centres and provided multimedia software and training for developing audio and video materials. Another example, USP’s western campus in Fiji utilizes the science and chemistry labs of a secondary school for providing local tutorial services to its distance and flexible learners. More Initiatives of this nature are needed to provide flawless flexible delivery in the Pacific.

The fourth issue is ICT developments in the Pacific. While USP is planning to move towards online learning, the levels of ICT developments in the Pacific remain a problem and challenge. In a survey

carried out by Whelan (2008) across the twelve USP member islands, he found the ten most common perceived challenges of educational ICT in the Pacific being “lack of adequate financing, lack of skilled personnel, poor access to infrastructure and ICT equipments, low awareness about the benefits of ICT, ineffective secondary infrastructure such as electricity and roads, low connectivity speeds and inadequate networks, difficulties in maintaining and repairing broken equipment, lack of ICT integration into the curriculum, lack of ICT culture and lack of trust and suspiciousness about ICT”. (p. 15).

While USP have tried to maintain adequate levels of ICT developments across its regional campuses for distance and flexible learners, sustaining it remains a challenge. Finding funds for upgrading and updating equipments have been difficult. More computers have led to the issue of space shortages in the regional campuses. Maintaining software license is becoming expensive thus it becomes hard to acquire recent versions of software. For instance, computer labs on USP’s main campus in Suva are still running Microsoft Office 2000. Connectivity speed in the regional campuses is low. Moreover, some campuses do not allow learners to access internet or have limited access to it. There is also lack of skills in using computer software and internet among the distance and flexible learners in the Pacific.

Proposing solutions for cross-regional homogenous ICT developments in the Pacific would be infeasible. Williams (2005) describes that “in terms of the rate of ICT development, Pacific island nations can be categorised into three groups; countries that are moving ahead with ICT development, countries which are planning and considering using ICT and countries which are doing nothing yet.” Despite this, USP have taken a proactive role in improving the ICT literacy. In 2006, USP Fiji Western Campus had launched Partners in the Advancement of Children Education (PACE) community education programme. The programme which is aimed at bridging the digital divide prevalent in the Pacific, involved providing free of charge basic IT training to primary school students and their parents. In its first year of implementation the programme provided IT training to about 860 primary school students and about 680 parents. The programme was piloted in the western Fiji areas, but USP is planning to implement this programme across all of its 14 regional campuses. For the present purpose, the South Pacific is defined as the area, and member countries, served by USP. This includes nine independent states, two selfgoverning jurisdictions (in free association with New Zealand) and one territory of New Zealand.⁴ The region stretches from the Cook Islands in the east to the Solomon Islands in the west and from the Marshall Islands in the north to Tonga in the south

It includes a population of around 1.7 million people and has three principal indigenous groupings (Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian). It covers an area of over 20 million square miles.⁵ When considering the form and content of legal education in the region account must be taken of the history of colonialism. For better or worse the region has experienced (and continues to experience) a myriad of influences from non-regional sources, many of which impact on legal education. These influences have survived the process of decolonisation and continue to have effect. In terms of constitutionally recognised law and legal systems, all of the countries of the region have a similar, imported base, but there is a diversity of cultural and customary considerations within which the largely introduced concepts operate. Court structures tend to mirror their adversarial counterparts in Britain and other common law countries, save for occasional differences of name, or the inclusion of tribunals that are dedicated to particular disputes, notably custom and land.

It is also important to appreciate, culture and custom within the South Pacific are neither uniform across the region (or even within a particular country) nor static.* Custom may be deeply rooted within the tradition of a country, province or district or may, in fact, be of much more recent origin, often dating from the mid nineteenth century and owing more to a close adaptation of Judeo-Christian belief than what might be considered as indigenous to that jurisdiction.¹ Formal legal education for students from the South Pacific island states has taken two routes²; one, through institutions in common law and Commonwealth countries beyond the USP region (notably some African States, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the UK) and the other, more recently, at USP itself. Until 1979, all legal education was provided outside the then USP region. The University of Papua New Guinea and the Legal Training Institute of that country, universities and colleges in Australia and New Zealand (and

to a lesser extent Ghana, Nigeria and the UK), and law practices in general (through apprenticeships), together provided both the so-called 'academic' and 'vocational' stages of legal education. Admission into legal practice within Pacific island countries was dependent on admission into the jurisdiction where a student was educated."

Another solution to cope with the infrastructure level issue is that USP can press for more alliances or "cross-sector fusions" (Wah & Tuisawau, 2001). More corporate, private, non-governmental and donor organizations must be involved in the creation of infrastructure throughout the country. For example, from 2001 to 2005, the University worked in close collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to use distance-related and versatile learning technologies to support them. JICA helped USP incorporate an online course management system (WebCT) and offered training on online training design, computer donation to various regional campuses and centres, interactive software and video and audio production training. Another example is the USP western campus in Fiji that uses secondary school science and chemistry laboratories to provide distant and versatile learners with local educational services. In order to provide a faultless versatile service in the Pacific, further initiatives of this sort are required.

According to the Whelan (2008) survey, cost and access to ICT was a "priority concern" and "efforts to address this issue would require systemic change, top-down policy support and financial support and planning". (p. 25). However, USP's BookCentre in conjunction with Telecom Fiji started a programme which allowed USP students to purchase a laptop for \$1500 which could be paid from their superannuation scheme. Previously, purchasing of any kind through the superannuation scheme wasn't allowed. Over the last two years, USP's BookCentre have sold more than 2300 laptops (BookCentre Manager, personal communication, January 8 2008) and the demands are increasing. Regional initiatives such as the "development of SPIN network, facilitated by the Secretariat of the South Pacific are aimed at building a new high-speed internet infrastructure for the region" (Whelan, 2008) can greatly improve connectivity by increasing access speeds while lowering access cost. This can have important implications for flexible delivery in the Pacific, particularly if combined with the rollout of global initiatives like the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) project. Not only it will improve access but it also improves ICT and information literacy, and can help in creating the ICT culture in the Pacific.

The University has also started to promote the use of free and open source (FOSS) software and started its own FOSS project which maintains a database of all free and open source software. The use of FOSS would eradicate the problems associated with licensing. The University itself is using the Moodle learning management systems, a FOSS for the delivery of its online courses and all computers in the campuses are also equipped with OpenOffice software.

Conclusion

Flexible delivery does make a difference. It makes differences to the academics, to the learners, to the management of the learning environment, and to the teaching and learning processes. These differences are usually encapsulated in the different ways of representing knowledge thus placing different information processing demands on learners. Problems arise when aspects of flexible delivery is unable to meet these demands.

Perhaps USP's generic experiences and problems of flexible delivery are similar to other educational institutions but the regionality and shared ownership of the university means that some problems encountered are unique. These problems include the inflexibility in the curriculum, problems of accessing the student support and varying levels of infrastructure and ICT development within the region. However, USP itself have taken some proactive steps in order to phase out these problems and move forward. This shows the important role and stature of flexible delivery at USP as it strives to be the premier educational institution in the region.

References

Casey, J. and Wilson, P. (2005). 'A practical guide to providing flexible learning in further and higher education', Retrieved 20 December, 2007

- from http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/flexibleDelivery/FD_Flexible_Learning_JCaseyFINALWEB.pdf
- Evans, J. & Hazelman, V. (2006), 'Hard digital realities: Teaching with technology in the Pacific Islands', Proceedings of the fourth Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, Commonwealth of Learning, Jamaica. Retrieved 29 November, 2007 from <http://pcf4.dec.uwi.edu/viewpaper.php?=193>
- George, R. & Luke, R. (1995). 'The critical place of information literacy in the trend towards flexible delivery in higher education contexts', Paper presented at the Learning for Life Conference, Adelaide, 30 November – 1 December, 1995. Retrieved 3 December, 2007 from http://www.city.londonmet.ac.uk/delibrations/flex.learning/rigmor_fr.html
- Gold, M., Swann, J., and Chief, I. (2002). 'Keeping it flexible: Integrating technology into distance education in the South Pacific', Educational Technology and Society, Vol. 5 (1), ISSN: 1436-4522. Retrieved 3 December, 2007 from http://www.ifets.info/journals/5_1/gold.html
- Hall, W. (1996). 'The educational paradigm shift: Implications for ICDE and the distance learning community', Open Praxis, Vol 2, pp. 27-36.
- Matthewson, C. (1994). 'Whose development, whose needs? Distance education practises and politics in the South Pacific', Journal of Distance Education, ISSN: 0830-0445.
- Norman, C. and Littlejohn, A. (2005). 'Flexible delivery: A model for analysis and implementation of flexible delivery programme', Retrieved 3 February, 2008 from http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/flexibleDelivery/flexible_delivery_QAA_124.pdf
- Nunan, T. (1996). 'Flexible delivery – what is it and why is it part of the current educational development?', Paper presented at the Higher Educational Research and Development Society of the Australasia Annual Conference, Perth, 8-12 July, 1996. Retrieved 29 November, 2007 from <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/delibrations/flexible-learning/nunan.cfm>
- Rao, K. (2007). 'Distance learning in Micronesia: Participants' experiences in a virtual classroom using synchronous technologies', Innovate, Vol. 4 (1). Retrieved 29 November, 2007 from <http://www.innovateonline.info/index.php?view=article&id=437>
- Smith, E. and Smith, P. (2004). 'Strategies for accommodating individuals' styles and preferences in flexible learning programmes', British Journal of Educational Technology, Vol. 35 (4), pp. 395-412.
- Wah, R. and Tuisawau, P. (2001). 'Flexible delivery at University of the South Pacific: No mean feat', Proceedings of the second Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, Commonwealth of Learning, South Africa.
- Whelan, R. (2008), 'Use of ICT in education and training in the South Pacific', Distance Education, Vol. 29 (1), pp. 53-70.
- Williams, B. (2005). 'Pacific Island states', Digital Review of Asia Pacific 2005-2006.