



## Research Skills Development at The University of the South Pacific

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### Abstract

*The University of the South Pacific adopted the Research Skills Development (RSD) framework in 2012 in its efforts to lift the research capacity of the region following its Strategic Total Academic Review (STAR) process. The adaptation was aimed at explicitly teaching critical research skills to university graduates and ultimately lifting the research capacity of the Pacific. The implementation process saw curriculum reform, which included the explicit development and assessment of research skills from the first year of study and flowing through to all subsequent years. Now, six years since the initial implementation, this paper looks at what worked, what didn't, and what must evolve. The paper outlines the project implementation process, challenges, and associated costs.*

### Background and Context

In its efforts to improve the quality of graduates and keep in line with international trends in learning and teaching, The University of the South Pacific underwent a Strategic Total Academic Review (STAR) initiative from mid-2010 to mid-2013, which focussed on the transformation of the University's academic portfolio. This was designed to 1) ensure the provision of relevant and internationally accredited programs; 2) improve course pass rates, student retention, and completion rates; 3) support greater progression to the next level of study; and 4) encourage the development of certain attributes, common to all USP students, which enhance employability (The University of the South Pacific, 2012). As part of this review, the university carried out its due diligence in assessing the pedagogical tools employed by comparator universities regionally and internationally. While there were no regional institutions which used the RSD framework, USP staff paid visits to University of Adelaide and Monash University to gain a thorough understanding of the RSD framework and the implementation processes. Following this fact-finding exercise in 2011, the STAR working group recommended that the University adopt and implement the Research Skills Development (RSD) framework (Willison & O'Regan, 2006/2013).

The STAR working group assessed the approach of implementation at University of Adelaide (bottom-up) and at Monash University (top-down and bottom-up) and determined the best fit approach for USP. The



implementation process at USP was a top down approach. Attendance to trainings and meetings were required by the University senior management and largely enforced by line managers. There were, however, extensive consultations with the course coordinators and other teaching staff ensuring that staff understood the drive for implementation and that their professional opinions were taken into account. It is important to note that the language of enforcement changed once the implementation had been successful in the first few courses. Records of initial correspondence with staff emphasised that the training and implementation are **mandated** whereas records from 2013 onwards use **advised**. Additionally, while the University classified the training and implementation as mandatory, there were no real repercussions for non-compliance.

Of the ten different approaches to using the RSD framework identified (Willison et al., 2009) USP adopted the following three approaches:

1. Developing a diagnostic assessment;
2. Developing RSD marking rubrics for assignment and/or project assessment; and
3. Curriculum re-shaping.

The implementation of RSD at USP commenced with the generic courses 'UU100 Communication and Information Literacy' and 'UU114 English for Academic Purposes' in 2012. Following these two courses, RSD was implemented in the course 'UU200 Ethics and Governance' during Semester 2 (2012) and in 'UU204 Pacific Worlds' during Semester 1 (2013).

In order to embed RSD in all undergraduate programmes at USP, at least one course from 100-level, 200-level and 300-level was selected in every discipline in which RSD was implemented. The courses had been selected in close consultation with Associate Deans from the Faculty of Arts, Law and Education (FALE), the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE) and the Faculty of Science, Technology and Environment (FSTE). The process for implementation of RSD in courses included training of course coordinators, design of RSD framed marking rubrics for assignments, alignment of the RSD marking rubric and assignment to one another, implementation of RSD marking rubric in at least one assignment in the course, and monitoring and evaluation of the implementation.

An added advantage of the RSD framework had been its substantial overlap with the USP Graduate Outcomes (GOs), which has further solidified the institutional drive for implementation. A recent mapping of the GOs and the RSD facets still shows a significant overlap ("USP Graduate Outcomes and RSD Framework," 2017). In the absence of measures for the achievement of USP GOs for the Strategic Plan period 2013 - 2018, the RSD framework became the standard with which institutional GOs were implemented and measured.

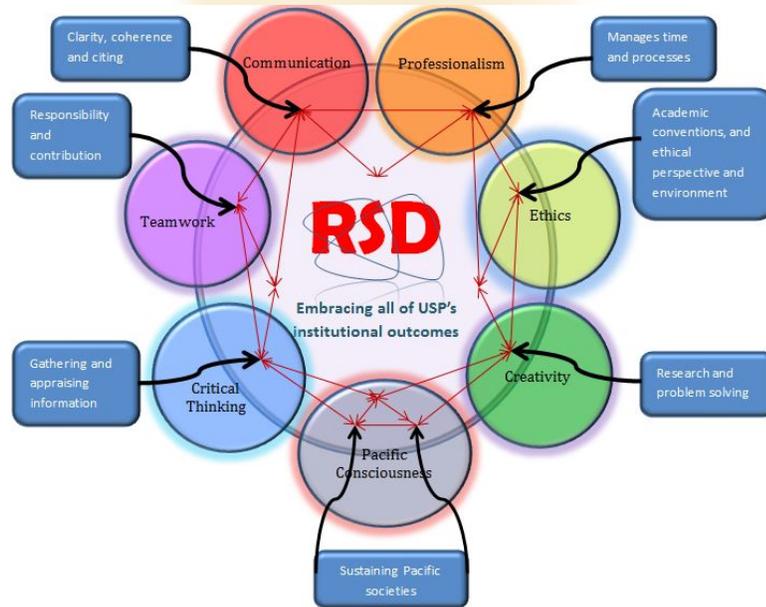


Figure 1: The RSD and USP Graduate Outcomes overlap.

### Staff Training and Development

To publicise and encourage the University's adaptation of the RSD framework, the Research Office facilitated numerous RSD workshops and consultations. The initial training programme included multiple and flexible interactive workshop sessions with academic staff. Between 2012 and 2016, the Research Office had facilitated 16 such workshops with more than 500 participants. Apart from the workshops, countless meetings and consultations had taken place over the 6-year period, refining the implementation process.

Refresher workshops were also conducted, allowing academics to provide feedback and reflections on the use of the RSD framework as well as inducting new staff members into the RSD user group. This allowed for collaboration in developing RSD teaching resources and approaches both within and across the schools, thus ensuring that there is an apparent level of progression from one level to the next. Building on the idea of sharing teaching experiences, the Research Office facilitated the formation of a "Community of Practice" (CoP) for RSD users in 2015.

The CoP allowed RSD practitioners to learn through their interactions with each other (Wenger, 1998). The key function of the CoP was for the practitioners of RSD to share their knowledge and skills for developing students' research literacy and skills in various disciplinary contexts in an informal and relaxed setting. Sharing good practices of teaching, student learning and assessment of research literacy and skills helped implement RSD in

more disciplines. Sharing of experiences with colleagues proved an effective way to maximise the implementation of the RSD framework for staff and students' benefits. This is also held true for sharing of experiences with international audience. The USP RSD website created initially for the USP community as a means of sharing resources, attracted attention of other universities also using the framework. The University of Wisconsin adopted the USP RSD Handbook providing USP staff with much encouragement in their work.

### **Contextualising the Framework**

Lawton defines curriculum as a selection from the culture of a society, of aspects which are regarded as so valuable that their survival is not left to chance, but is entrusted to teachers for expert transmission to the young (Lawton, 2012). Similarly, research literacy and skills were determined to be of paramount importance to USP graduates and thus a gradual curriculum reform process was undertaken to explicitly and effectively incorporate the skills in the curriculum. The University undertook the curriculum reform through the (re)design of marking rubrics which were RSD-informed. The design and use of the marking rubric in the courses were eventually used as evidence of RSD implementation.

Reforming of the curricula to implement the RSD framework meant that the new framework and the associated terminology needed to be “unpacked” for first time users. Through workshops and consultations on ingraining the framework into the curriculum, new metaphors for the framework emerged. Of interest were the contextualisation of the framework in the Pacific Worlds [UU204] and courses in the School of Social Sciences. The workshop participants generated very Pacific-specific metaphors involving canoes, weaving, and coconuts. Although the University is yet to fully embark on (re-)creating the RSD framework in a more Pacific-specific framework, there are disciplines that have adopted the framework to particular disciplinary and cultural contexts. Contextualising the framework ensures that the teaching and learning is sustainable. Recent research in the Pacific reconfirms that an ideal teacher is one who is “cognizant of cultural, social, and learning contexts in the classroom in order to facilitate student learning” (Crossley et al., 2017). By cultivating a culturally vibrant learning environment, educators ensure learners are more likely to succeed (Kana'iaupuni, Ledward, & Malone, 2017) therefore the University is now beginning to strongly encourage discourse in this area.

## RSD Implementation

The University has used four measures of RSD implementation:

1. training;
2. marking rubric design;
3. marking rubric implementation; and
4. monitoring of implementation (external review of rubric).

Since the initial implementation in 2012, there have been 81 courses which have achieved 80%<sup>1</sup> or more of implementation status spanning over 25 disciplines. Of the 25 disciplines featuring RSD-embedded courses, 8 of these have RSD in at least one course at each level in the undergraduate degree programme. While this accounts for only 7% of the total courses offered at the University, RSD has been fully implemented in all the generic courses at 100, 200 and 400 levels ensuring that all undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes have at least one RSD-embedded course.

Faculty/Centre	RSD Discipline Count*	RSD Course Count
Faculty of Arts, Law and Education	9	39
Faculty of Business and Economics	9	19
Faculty of Science, Technology and Environment	9	19
Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development	1	4

*\*including generic courses*

While the regular trainings ensured all stakeholders were familiar with the framework, the University spent more than the budgeted amount for the three-year rollout. Data extracted from training reports indicate an average of FJD42,765 spent on training-related expenses per year. Over the 2012 – 2016 period, the approximate total of training-related expenses amounted to FJD213,825. The RSD project was allocated a mere FJD50,000 for the implementation over the 2012 – 2014 period, whereas the cost was approximately FJD128,295. For the same period, the University spent FJD16.9m on consultancy and workshops. The RSD project expenses amounted to 0.76% of the University's consultancy and workshops budget for 2012-2014. One of the key factors leading to the increase in the cost of implementation has been regular consultancy payments to University staff to run

<sup>1</sup> Implementation of RSD in just one mode (face-to-face/online/blended) of the course counts as 80% implementation, as implementation into other modes will essentially mean transfer of the RSD assessments to the other modes.

trainings. This approach made the implementation sustainable and self-sufficient, but led to increased expenses in compensating staff time and efforts and increased reliability of the Research Office on academic staff.

In retrospect, the institutional-level implementation at USP could have benefited from being closely aligned with the overall learning and teaching agenda of the University. The RSD implementation has a direct impact on the core learning and teaching activities of the university, therefore a more consolidated approach for the implementation of RSD that included the Faculty or School Assessment Committees and was tied to the Learning and Teaching quality agenda at the University would have seen the implementation proceed rapidly.

### **Future of RSD at USP**

Efforts are now underway to alter the implementation approach to centralise the RSD trainings through the University Library. The library-led approach to implement the RSD framework has achieved extensive success at Monash University in Australia. The Library's collaboration with the faculties at Monash not only sped up the rate at which the RSD was being implemented, but also dramatically increased the number of RSD-informed programmes (Torres & Jansen, 2016). The University of the South Pacific plans to roll out the centralised trainings from Semester 1 (2018) by USP librarians, who will be mentored by Monash University librarians.

The University is also shifting to programme-level implementation rather than focusing on individual courses, in efforts to ensure progressive levels of autonomy in the programme courses. Programme-level implementation will also ensure increased exposure to and practice of the research skills, with the aim of increasing the likelihood of students continuing to use research skills post-graduation (Grabowski, Heely, & Brindley, 2008). Work on the development of an RSD policy which would validate and support the use of RSD is also under way to further the sustainability of the RSD implementation.

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