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11. RECONCEPTUALISING SUPPORT FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION WITHIN THE PACIFIC (A SEA OF ISLANDS)

Exploring the Vaka

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we consider the ways in which the University of the South Pacific (USP) has embraced inclusion and disability support and explore the development and implementation of policy on Inclusion and Inclusive Education in higher education in the South Pacific region. We review the impact, made over time, by the Disability Resource Centre (DRC), and their support that has touched the lives of persons with disabilities. These activities have been linked to Regional and International policies, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Pacific Framework on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PFRPD), and the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action. Very often, “education policy is ‘grown’ in the developed world and then later exported to developing countries. But in each case the local context of policy and practice allows us to examine the particular pressures for change within national [and in this case regional] education systems and the tensions that they can give rise to nationally and internationally” (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2010, p. x).

For non-Pacific Islanders, it is easy to conclude that the peoples of the region are separated by the sea. However, the Pacific can be understood as “a sea of islands” as opposed to “islands in a far sea” Hau’ofa (2008, p. 32). Hau’ofa (2008) challenged the idea of separation and argued that the peoples of the region must wake up to the realization that they are connected by the sea rather than separated by it. The USP embraced the notion of connectedness and though we live in a globalised world and our education system needs to reflect that fact, we also seek out opportunities to preserve those aspects of our cultural traditions that have served us well and weave them into current understandings of the world. Hau’ofa (1994) encouraged the peoples of Oceania to create standards that reflect the excellence of their elders and not be confined by external hegemonic understandings of the Pacific. This rallying cry is critical to the understanding of education in the Region, because all too often, deficit understandings of disability and neoliberal

understandings of the purpose of education imported from the developed world impact the way education is conceptualised and implemented (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2010).

Ironically, inclusive education can also be characterised as reflecting imported models, and therefore by the exclusion of the culture and traditions of indigenous societies (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2010). In this chapter, we examine the challenges addressed by the University of the South Pacific as a regional university as it has sought to develop an inclusive educational perspective and practice drawing on Pacific cultural traditions and approaches to learning and engagement.

The World Education Forum at Incheon encouraged the Pacific to consider inclusion and equity through education as:

...the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda. The World Forum urged member countries to...commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. No education target should be considered met unless met by all. (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 19–22)

The chapter is a call for rekindling the magnificent boundlessness of the Pacific Islands as we encourage the peoples of the region to explore their vaka (journey) and operate within their power spaces of: Community Development; Sharing and Social Responsibility and Respect.

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC CONTEXT

The University of the South Pacific holds a unique position as a regional and international university in the Pacific. It provides further and higher education to the communities of the Pacific in 12 member countries through 14 campuses spread over 33 million kilometers. There are also students from non-member countries such as China, countries across the Caribbean, Japan, Norway, the United States and others. This year, 2018, marks the 50th Anniversary of this University's presence in the region. The current Chancellor of the USP, His Excellency Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konusi Konrote, President of Fiji, in his launching of the 50th Anniversary celebrations on 5 February 2018 remarked, "The past fifty (50) years have been a period of tremendous change for USP and the young people today enjoy more opportunity in education than ever before in our history" (News@ USP, 2018). One such opportunity that will be addressed is the support provided by the Disability Resource Centre (DRC).

As the leading institution of tertiary education in the region, the USP also recognises that it can provide practical, on-the-ground, support for the implementation of inclusive education policies as they are re-conceptualised in line with current international discourses for improving our educational understandings and systems but also through the lens of our cultural traditions and perspectives. Thus, work on inclusive education in the region aims to maintain its unique Pacific identity

(for example, through the *Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2016–2025*), whilst being cognisant of international policy developments, and in particular aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal # 4 on Quality Education (UN, 2015).

Students with a disability are a minority group within any university unless they are educated at an institution such as Gallaudet University which seeks to offer barrier-free, higher education for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. In this chapter, we will focus specifically on the contribution of the Disability Resource Centre in supporting the implementation of inclusive educational policy across the University. We aim to understand some of the experiences of students with a disability and those who support them in their quest to obtain tertiary qualifications so that we can improve our practice as a regional university serving students from developing countries.

The Disability Resource Centre at USP

The DRC was established in 2013 as a response to the University's 2013–2018 strategic plan on 'improving students services'. In April of the same year, the University's Disability Inclusiveness Policy was endorsed to guide how the University would support students with disabilities throughout USP campuses around the region. The policy states that USP supports the 2009 Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) statement on disability where regional leaders reaffirmed their commitment to persons with disabilities who are among the poorest and most vulnerable in the world and face many barriers to full participation in society. In support of the Forum Leaders, the USP agreed to ensure that people with disabilities would have access to higher education and more equitable opportunities for the achievement of their educational goals and enhancement of their quality of life, as an expression of their human rights.

Since 2013, 114 students (Males: 68, Females: 46) with disabilities have enrolled at the University of the South Pacific. Moreover, in the same period, a total of 20 (Males: 11, Females: 9) Students with Disabilities (SWDs) have graduated; 14 have found employment, 4 have continued to further their studies and 2 have returned to their home countries (Tonga and Solomon Islands). Though the numbers appear small, this nonetheless represents significant progress given the paucity of awareness and around inclusive education and pre-tertiary opportunities in the 12 USP member countries. For example, inclusive education has only recently become a major policy direction for Fiji's Primary and Secondary Schools.

Over the years, the DRC has emerged as an important advocacy and support unit providing technical advice and support on inclusive teaching and learning as well as promoting a barrier-free physical environment, inclusive disaster management planning and inclusive event management during Graduation ceremonies, Orientation week and USP Open Days.

As a result, the DRC works alongside faculties and other support services to ensure that the pedagogy and curriculum of University programs are responsive to the needs of *all* students. It also enhances the University's role as an exemplar regional tertiary institution being the first university in the region to have a Disability Resource Centre.

In addition, the DRC works very closely with the University's Faculty of Arts, Law and Education's (FALE) Special and Inclusive Education team to promote inclusive classroom pedagogies. Externally, it collaborates with other regional agencies through the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP) and the Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) to implement the Pacific Framework on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PFRPD) and the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action.

METHODOLOGY

In this interpretive case study, current regional and international documents have been analysed. Some of these include: University files and documents related to the history of the Disability Resource Centre; USP's Disability Inclusiveness Policy; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat's Pacific Framework on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PFRPD); the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action; The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); and, relevant journal articles on Inclusive Education in the Pacific. Some of the analysis was of a chronological nature while others traced the conceptual policy development of special and inclusive education across the Pacific. We also conducted institutional research using semi-structured interviews to highlight the views of students with a disability. We likewise interviewed student buddies and staff at the University to ascertain the impact of the DRC in the following areas: providing access to students with disabilities; challenges and opportunities for students who are blind; challenges and opportunities for students who are deaf; the Student Buddy model; inclusion across the University; provision of access to scholarships and services at the University; and, how the centre has supported student voice through advocacy.

DISCUSSION

Pacific Islands Forum and USP Partnership for Advancing Inclusive Education

The University of the South Pacific works in partnership with regional organisations of the Pacific at different levels on different agendas to achieve its key objectives: transforming the USP's pedagogy and curriculum; ensuring programmes continue to be relevant and responsive to the needs of the region; promoting Pacific consciousness and cohesiveness; strengthening and expanding communication and partnership with stakeholders in government, CROP agencies, industry, media, non-state actors and the community; and, enhancing the University's role as an exemplar regional institution in tertiary education.

One such example of this partnership is that with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS). The PIFS is a political grouping of 18 member governments namely: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The Secretariat's mandate is delivered through the annual Leaders' Forum Meeting Communiqués and high level ministerial meeting decisions such as the Forum Education Ministers Meeting (FEEdMM) biannual meetings.

The USP is a permanent observer and is often mandated by the FEEdMM to coordinate and implement regional educational agendas on issues faced by member governments. The FEEdMM provides greater awareness amongst Forum Education Ministers of global trends and issues in education development and how they could impact on Pacific education. The meetings provide an opportunity for Ministers of Education to gain a deeper appreciation of their common educational challenges and agree on high level policy directions for regional cooperation and key education priorities for countries. The meeting also encourages development partners such as Australia and New Zealand to strengthen partnerships through the sharing of resources and expertise to provide maximum impact in the development of education in the Pacific Region.

The PIFS was also mandated to coordinate the implementation of the Framework for Pacific Regionalism as well as regional frameworks approved by the Forum Leaders as follows: the Pacific Regional Strategy on Disability (PRSD: 2011–2015); and, a regional policy that was recently approved for implementation by the Leaders, the Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PFRPD: 2016–2025). A key purpose of the PFRPD is to provide a regional modality to strengthen coordination and collaboration in support of national initiatives. One such regional working group that oversees the implementation of this regional framework is the Disability Task Force which advises and assists in the regional coordination and implementation of the PFRPD: 2016–2025. The USP as a member of this reference group, reports its mainstreaming initiatives and activities through this forum. The DRC is one important initiative where the USP supports the education of persons with disabilities in the Pacific as a key aim of the PFRPD. The voices of learners with disabilities are captured below, landscaping the reality of current issues in the provision of support at the USP.

Experiences of Students with Disabilities: Providing Access to Students with Disabilities

Andrew indicated that before he started at the University of the South Pacific he did not know that there was a Disability Resource Centre. He explained that he never dreamt that one day he would attend University. He thanks his brother's friend who informed his family about the DRC:

When my dad and I visited the DRC, I was informed about the services and the support that were available for me, for example, I could have access to the JAWS software which reads my notes to me, buddies to assist me and that I could sit my exam at the DRC. In my first week, I was nervous but excited and quickly got to know how things worked around here. I quickly made new friends with the buddies, my class mates and my tutors.

Andrew acknowledged that staff at the DRC were “very helpful because it has made a very big difference in my life”.

Melita, another student, acknowledged that she was grateful for the great assistance from the Fiji Association of the Deaf (FAD) project officer. They encouraged her to visit the DRC for help and advice before she applied to enroll at USP:

My first experience at USP was when I was in forms 6 and 7 and my high school attended the USP Open Day. I was inspired to pursue further studies and I was determined to enroll at USP.

She found that the staff at the DRC were “very welcoming, informative and encouraging, which encouraged and empowered us to study here at USP”.

Challenges and Opportunities for Students Who Are Blind

Like any support service, the DRC has its own challenges, one of which is to ensure that students who are blind or visually impaired have access to soft copies of printed texts. This is especially challenging when copyright has to be obtained from abroad or prohibits the reproduction of material. In such cases, permission has to be sought from the publisher to obtain a soft copy of the publication. Moreover, some students who are blind have never used the Job Access with Speech (JAWS) software, and the DRC then has to ensure that new students are taught how to use JAWS which is a computer screen *reader* program designed for use with Microsoft Windows. This software allows persons who are blind and visually impaired to read the screen either with a text-to-speech output or via a refreshable Braille display.

Challenges and Opportunities for Students Who Are Deaf

Other challenges include the availability of disability support services to USP’s regional campuses and sign language interpreting at University level. Although available, the challenge of sign language interpreting is ensuring that correct information is communicated to students especially when the majority of the deaf community are not familiar with University-level academic vocabularies. This also means that most academic words do not have a corresponding sign. Consequently, writing academic papers is a skill that is challenging for students who are deaf. They struggle firstly with learning the new vocabularies, then learning to use them in context. The lack of academic sign language also affects effective interpreting as

sign language interpreters are inclined to use very simple sentences when interpreting lectures and tutorials. This detracts from the actual meaning of theories, ideas and concepts that are being taught as sign language interpreters are usually not familiar with either the content or the academic concepts of the various subject areas. As Ana, one of the Student Learning Support (SLS) Specialists, explained:

Working with students with disabilities has always been an eye-opening experience. It forces one to be grateful for the abilities one has, to be compassionate, and most of all to learn – in this case, learning a new language...sign language.

I realised that sign language has its own structure, different from English, which was sometimes challenging for the students. The role of the Sign Language Interpreters was significant as they signed the equivalent of English sentences with all the articles, prepositions, conjunctions, etc, rather than only key words. Apart from the structure, I also noticed that with vocabulary I can use a word which the Sign Language Interpreters will use a synonym as its sign would be established already. There were also certain words I used, for which they all had to 'design' a sign.

The DRC is currently working with the sign language interpreters and deaf students to collate all the new signs as a resource for future sign language interpreters, students who are deaf and DRC officers. This intervention will ensure the standardization of academic sign language among users within the University.

The Student Buddy Model

The DRC student buddy model has been recognized as an extremely useful and empowering resource because of the assistance provided to DRC students by the student buddies. They are usually contracted at the beginning of each semester.

The buddy system supports not only the student who is disabled but, if implemented correctly, the buddy also acquires an understanding that it is normal to be different. Through the shared experience, the student buddy and the student with a disability both have the opportunity to develop an enhanced understanding of each other's abilities.

Student buddies guide students to and from lecture halls and tutorial rooms to the DRC and through orientation exercises, help to familiarise students with their new environment, the evacuation routes closest to their lecture rooms, directions to washroom from the lecture room and so on. The buddies write and record notes to allow the students to listen to their lecturers and assist the student in maneuvering the computer screen when accessing the Student Online Services (SOLS), the library data base, campus life activities and so on. As part of their service, the buddies read academic texts to the students since most text books are not available electronically and is therefore not accessible via JAWS. Some academic texts are also audio recorded so that students can study at their convenience.

When working with students who are deaf and hearing impaired, buddies accompany them to group discussions, lectures/tutorials. Students are familiar with their new environment with the assistance of the buddies who take notes for the student to allow the student to focus on the sign language interpreter. Buddies also provide support for students to access the library database and they pay particular attention to new vocabulary that the students who are deaf and hard of hearing will need to learn for their course. This invaluable service supports the work of the sign language interpreters as they design or develop a sign for the new vocabularies.

Regardless of the disability, buddies accompany students to coordination meetings where students meet their lecturers and tutors to familiarise themselves with the course content. They may also assist students with their assignments by explaining what is required and provide support socially so that students learn to socialise within their new environment and make new friends. Student buddies may also assist other students by editing their assignments and explaining their notes.

The student buddy model has positively impacted both DRC students and student buddies, with some buddies deciding to change their career path. For example, one student who was studying law decided to pursue human rights with a specific interest in advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities:

Tavenisa, a female Law student, explained that she changed the focus of her studies:

I never fully understood the stigma with being disabled until I had the privilege of working with students at the DRC. I am so grateful for the experience which I will take with me to my legal profession. I have developed a keen interest in inclusive studies and if given the platform in the future, I will surely advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities.

Talica indicated that she always wanted to become a lawyer who specialized in criminal law:

However, through the buddy system initiative, socializing with students with disabilities and buddies, it has changed my career dream where I aspire to be a lawyer who specializes in human rights for people with disabilities...so that I can also contribute back to the center and to my friends and family members with disabilities. Their disability is not inability.

Others have mentioned that the experience at the DRC has changed their perception of life and the meaning of true service with many referring to the DRC as their USP family. The following are the comments from Tomasi, a young man studying Commerce:

I signed up at the Disability Resource Centre with the motive of getting a few experiences before getting into the workforce. However, the 14 weeks at the

DRC has been a life changing experience. I didn't really expect to learn so much as I ended up calling my client, my brother and the rest of my colleagues my family. This Centre has taught me so much patience and understanding.

There have also been student buddies with a disability like Fulori, a young lady who stated that:

As a student with a disability I was able to mentor others by sharing my own experiences and skills. It has enabled me to develop confidence in public relations and public speaking. I would like to encourage other students with disabilities to become buddies.

Vuniani explained that:

Being a buddy at the Disability Resource Centre has made me more patient and has enabled me to be more open minded to situations I face in life and helped me a lot in dealing with things in a more gracious and neutral way.

Inclusion across the University

The following students share their experiences of having the support of the buddy system.

Serupepeli explained that he was previously a student at a Vocational school:

The USP DRC has provided the necessary facilities, reasonable accommodations and buddies during my years of studies. It has assisted me with my studies especially being confident in attempting my tutorial questions, able to retrieve information taught during satellite tutorials. An example is my grades which I have improved and it has empowered and encouraged me to keep trying and aim higher for better education for a high paid career in the future.

Andrew, another student, thought that he would struggle at university but indicated that:

My tutors were very helpful, for example, while writing on the board, they would explain what they were writing or describe the picture they were drawing. They always made sure that I sat at the front. I also had an audio recorder to record classroom discussions and a buddy was available to take my notes.

Antonio, a second year Bachelor of Commerce student, explained that:

The buddies helped with my mobility and helped with my assignments if needed. The DRC had also helped in meeting my lecturers to ease learning in USP which has helped me pass my 100 level courses. I am also thankful for their counselling which has helped me get this far in my studies.

Providing Access to Scholarships and Services at USP

The DRC records also highlight that the majority of students with disabilities enrolled at the University are under the TELS (Tertiary Education Loan Scheme) program which is available for Fiji nationals. This national system provides interest free loans to students to enable them to study at university. Without such support, enrollment of Students with Disabilities at USP would be very low. In addition, since February 2017, USP has been able to offer scholarships specifically for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) across all USP member countries – Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Solomon Island, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Niue, Nauru and Tokelau, as well as Fiji, which enables them to study at the main University campus in Laucala, Fiji. This is an important step towards no one being left behind.

In 2017, the DRC collaborated with the University library to provide extra tutorials to our students with disabilities. As a result, weekly targeted sessions began. Two separate sessions were piloted, one for students with vision impairments and the other for students with hearing impairments. Students with other disabilities were able to sit in either session. This approach was taken to enable the librarian to teach while being mindful of the students' special educational needs. For example, while teaching students with visual impairment, a task-analysed, step-by-step approach was used to familiarise students with the library web page and explain to students how to get to the library's database with the assistance of the JAWS software.

The sessions have been enlightening for the librarian and both the librarian and the students experienced a steep learning curve as they built a rapport and helped each other through the process. This intervention targeted approach for students with disabilities began in April 2017 and has continued every semester since then. While there is a lot still to be discovered, the commitment of the staff of the Library will ensure that together, the DRC and the Library could grow through the sharing of new experiences as both travel together on an inclusive journey.

In 2017, the USP Regional Scholarship Team (RST) provided non-academic support to students who are disabled under the Australia Awards Pacific Scholarships (AAPS) funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Australia. This was the first time that DFAT sponsored scholarships for students with a disability had been provided in the region. While it was a tremendous challenge and a learning experience for the Team it was important to ensure that they were afforded the same learning opportunities as the other non-disabled AAPS sponsored students. Most of the sponsored students were from the other Pacific island countries with five from Fiji, four of whom were hearing impaired. These students enrolled in various diploma level programmes across the university:

The first biggest challenge was trying to find suitable sign language interpreters for each student for the semesters. Fortunately for the students the sponsor covered costs for the interpreters. During the process of recruiting interpreters and as the semester began the Team [experienced] an interesting learning curve to learn more about the needs of these students.

Fortunately the DRC provided a great service not only to the students but to us as well. They helped us find efficient sign language interpreters. DRC and RST office have worked together from the beginning of the year and would continue to do so for as long as students with disability are on AAPS awards. The DRC has made a commitment to DFAT to provide the necessary support for these students including a sign language interpreter for lectures and tutorials and also buddies.

Supporting Student Voice through Advocacy

In March 2017, the students at the DRC also established an association known as the 'Empowered Students with Disabilities Association (ESDA)'. The core function of the association is to represent the voice of students with disabilities to the University and this student led organization is affiliated to the wider University's Students' Association (USPSA). As a result SWDs are able to share their concerns through appropriate forums. One such concern was the availability of JAWS software in other computer labs to enable access after working hours. As a result of the students advocacy, JAWS Version 8 was installed in one of the computers at the University library which was an ideal location as it provided computer access after working hours, security and access to disability friendly washrooms.

Through ESDA, the association was able to receive FDS\$2000.00 per semester from the USP Students' Association to cater for welfare needs and student activities. Though the fund seems small, it is a beginning and through this fund, the association was able to identify needs and activities that needed to be funded. For example, a needs analysis showed that students travelling from afar were leaving home very early without breakfast and those from low socio-economic backgrounds were going without lunch most days of the week. As a result, food items and eating utensils were bought and stored at the DRC student common room to ensure that students were provided with meals.

Throughout the years, DRC students have shown resilience, patience and relentless commitment to ensure success. They have had to work extra hard with the assistance of buddies and lecturers to ensure that they succeed at the end of each semester. Such attempts are a reflection of sheer determination that other students forego. At the same time, it emphasises the significance of providing reasonable accommodation to support students with disabilities in their quest for success in higher education. It also highlights the importance of a suitable transition model from high school to University life where students and their teachers are educated about the possibilities available to empower students and support them in becoming independent citizens.

Despite the challenges, the DRC has become a haven for students with disabilities, with many referring to it as a safe place when they feel insecure, awkward and out-of-place. This is especially the case when they are new to the university environment and its system of learning.

CONCLUSION

As one Student Learning Specialist explained:

Every day I am reminded not to see her blindness but her vision, to see the ability and not the disability, to also learn to see from her perspective and not always mine.

Andrew, one of the DRC students, recognised that not all students with disabilities in the region are able to come to main Laucala Campus, so, he would like to recommend that:

a Disability Resource Centre should be available on other campuses, even if it has to be a small room. Now that education is made accessible to everyone, our regional campuses should be accessible to students with disabilities as well. We should never underestimate the difference we can make in a person's life.

While discourses about inclusion in the Pacific focus mainly on disability and is referred to as disability-inclusion in many spaces across the region, we would argue that inclusion as a concept and a process is much broader than disability. We need to be mindful that...there may be an increasing dependence on foreign financial and intellectual resources that often devalues diverse Pasifiki traditional knowledge and cultural capital. There may be a need to study and draw from Pasifiki cultural histories (thousands of years) and other highly evolved systems and strategies for learning to live sustainable lives, for better adaptation and resilience.

At the University of the South Pacific, as with other universities across the world, while there are inclusive education policies and diversity policies, these are not supported by focussed staff training. Disability policy is often interpreted as a student issue that could be supported through a resource centre. However, little or no training is designed to educate staff about their responsibilities towards all students including those who are disabled. University policies are often not geared towards the inclusion of disabled staff. It is almost as if a staff with a disability is a non-consideration (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Equally, some students still attempt to conceal their disabilities in order to avoid discrimination (Riddell & Weedon, 2014).

In conclusion, the pursuit of inclusivity through regional policy spaces in the Pacific region ultimately requires that there is zero tolerance on all forms of exclusion. If Inclusive Education processes of change driven by regional frameworks are to succeed, then *all* levels of government machinery and ALL stakeholders must work together towards attaining an inclusive Pacific.

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