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**Theme: Opportunities for equality: Pacific perspectives**

**Topic: *Providing opportunities for equality:***

*Pacific islands students' experiences and perception on the use of ICT and e-learning.*

### Abstract

While embracing the technological change and negotiating the changing demands of its diverse student needs, the University of the South Pacific (USP), is constantly engaging in various forms of curricula reforms to ensure that it best fits its context. The location of Japan –Pacific ICT Centre at USP's main campus has placed greater expectation on USP as the regional hub for ICT to be at the cutting edge in achieving excellence in distance education and e-learning. USP needs to recognize the importance of meeting the needs of its culturally diverse student population and at the same time is accountable to the needs of its member countries and donor partners. A recent move by USP to offer more of its courses through online and blended mode in order to reach out to regional students has been received with mixed reactions by both students and staff. As such there is a need for more research to gauge the effectiveness and inclusiveness in terms of meeting the diverse needs of our regional students, particularly those studying through online, distance and flexible mode (DFL). This research paper presents the results of a small scale study that investigated the significance of this curriculum reform in terms of access and equity and how it is perceived by both Laucala and regional students. More specifically, the paper intends to highlight the perceptions of regional students in online learning and teaching of one of the four interdisciplinary courses, 'Pacific Worlds' (UU204). Since 2012, UU204 has been introduced as a generic course, for all students enrolled at undergraduate level. The course is currently offered to both Laucala and the regional students through a common curriculum content using an online mode. The paper presents a number of interesting results on students' perceptions of e-learning and e-teaching at USP.

**(Keywords:** curriculum reforms, e-learning, inclusiveness, distance and flexible learning, culturally diverse needs, regional hub, ICT )

## Introduction

Distance education and information and communication technologies are arguably the most significant reform that has altered higher education spectrum globally and the Pacific region since the last four decades. The [accelerated](#) evolution of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), web based education tools, [the ubiquity of the internet](#) and social networking compounded with unprecedented challenges of globalization has created a major shift in the way learning and teaching is conceived at higher education all over the world and the Oceania<sup>1</sup>. This has not only led to redefining of policies and pedagogies but has also created an explosion of interests and ideas amongst higher education administrators, policy makers, teachers and students. Amidst all these hype, universities are also challenged to meet the demands of quality, accessibility, equity, accountability and international accreditation. The University of the South Pacific (USP), being a regional university undoubtedly is negotiating its way through the various challenges and is compelled to adopt and adapt to radical changes to meet the sweeping demands. More recently, USP, like many other higher education institutions is also embracing and adopting flexible learning methods and online technologies which not only increase the potential to attract more students but are also providing opportunities to widen access for those communities for whom participation in tertiary learning may previously have been difficult. With strong competitiveness in the globalised higher education sector and growing demand to widen access, increasing number of academic leaders believe that offering online courses is critical to their institutions long term strategy (Allen, Seaman & Garrett 2007). However, to be successful in delivering quality online education to students who may or will never set foot on a university and are spread across geographical space and socio-cultural diversity, learning contexts requires far much greater resource allocation and planning.

This paper considers student experiences as a key indicator of the quality of educational provision using information and communication technologies (ICT). Quality of online education is a central issue for the sustainable delivery, development and future of technology-supported learning (MacLoughlin & Visser 2003). In its simplest form, quality in education is that which satisfies the student (Ellis, 1993). According to Harris (1999) ‘quality online learning takes more than a good content, it takes a commitment to providing a complete learning environment’

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<sup>1</sup> As described by Hau’ofa (1993)

(p139). Since the learning contexts and needs amongst different centers and campuses vary, there are risks that the quality of education delivery could fail to capture well in the area of accessibility and equity, especially if all students, regardless of their physical location, are offered blended/online courses through common online curriculum content and pedagogies. For the purpose of this presentation, **ICT in education** is defined as use of computers and internet based technology and telecommunications networks used in teaching and learning. **Online mode (O)** where most or all of the content is delivered online and typically has no face-to-face meetings, that is, 80+% is offered in the Learning Management System (LMS) such as Moodle as used by USP. **Face to face mode (f2f)** refers to those courses that are offered with at least two hours of lectures per week and face-to-face tutorials during the semester of offer. Face-to-face courses may have selected online or multi-media components (USP Handbook 2013). **Blended mode (B)** also known as Hybrid learning refers to amalgamation of face to face and online learning, where a substantial proportion (see appendix 1) is delivered online with some f2f learning.

## **Background**

The use of ICT tool to offer distance education<sup>2</sup> and more now considered as flexible learning has seen rapid increase in the number of students enrolled at USP. Arguably this can be considered as one of the best strategies that USP has adopted to address the learning needs of the region. More recently, the advancement and spread of internet and web-based technology and improvement in ICT infrastructure in the wider Pacific provides greater opportunities to USP to offer more of its distance education courses through blended learning and online learning (CFL 2013). Internet based learning and online learning is assumed to offer unprecedented possibilities for social and information interactivities that are essential in lifelong learning process for both on campus and distant USP students<sup>3</sup>. Kozma and Johnston (1991) have found that ICT can play the role of ‘catalyst’ in the qualitative improvement of learning experience in a number of disciplines and a variety of education institutions. However, whether or not online teaching and learning

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<sup>2</sup> USP began offering distance education since 1970s

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO promotes the use of ICT in knowledge sharing and promoting ‘a truly democratic open learning world’ at the same time it acknowledges the challenges involved (UNESCO )

meets quality learning outcome is a highly contentious issue since the theory of online learning has been both condemned and celebrated in educational research and practice.

Research on local opportunities of higher education and e-learning conditions in the Pacific region indicate variations from country to country in terms of access and opportunity (Tanaka 2012). Empirical research on higher education opportunities in the Pacific point out access to ICT as an important factor in distance learning and at the same time drawing attention to numerous other barriers (Whelan 2008). There are risks of e-learning becoming technology-driven and that not enough attention is being given to learning objectives, good learning design, the management of e-learning events, the selection of the right technology or the adoption of e-learning by educators and learners (Engelbrecht 2003). Garrison and Shale (1990) point out that emphasis on flexibility and independence offered through online learning could overlook the need to have sustained dialogue between teachers and students, which is essential for the teaching and learning process. Current theoretical and practical conceptualization of use of ICT and higher education in the Oceania region also lacks the attention required in the area of socio-cultural context in which normal learning and teaching occurs. Ngeow and Kong (2002) state that because of the evolving nature of cultural diversity and requirements, there can be no single prescribed model for ensuring the design of all culturally relevant environments' (p.4).

Current research on the use of ICT within the Pacific context reveals both promises as well as challenges. Hogan & Kedrayate (2010) use innovative blended approach of teaching science education throughout the Pacific as an example to substantiate that embedding ICT tools in education is imperative to prepare students for the socio-economic demands of career. Bakalevu (2010) found that blended learning had positive outcomes for distance learners, all of whom had no online experience and little exposure to internet and computers. Raturi, Hogan & Thaman (2011), through a small scale research involving use of ICT and online students from Suva, Fiji show promising indication, whereby students show readiness and are keen and enthusiastic to use virtual learning management system to undertake postgraduate courses at USP. However, there is dearth of comprehensive findings on digital access, equity and readiness of students both on campus and distant students who are currently engaged through blended and online learning through a common virtual classroom. Additionally, there is absence of

comprehensive research that actually gauges quality of learning within different learning contexts.

### **The USP Context**

The University of the South Pacific was founded in 1968 to serve a culturally and geographically diverse student population of its founding eleven and later twelve member countries (see figure 1): Fiji, Tonga, Cook Islands, Nauru, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Niue, Marshall Islands, Tokelau, Samoa, Vanuatu, and Tuvalu as well as other countries worldwide. The region is spread within 33million square km. Given its geographical location and dispersal, it was essential to expand on distance education which commenced in 1971. Since then, USP has made great strides in using innovative ICT tools to enhance and advance it's delivery of courses. Presently, with upgrading of ICT infrastructure, USP is transformed into a flexible multimodal institution and is viewed to be successful and progressive in its role in assisting Pacific Island countries (PICs) in dealing with an increasingly open, competitive and knowledge dependent world Chandra (2013).

The University is governed by a Council consisting of representatives from USP's member countries, and senior officers of the University. Council is advised on academic matters by Senate. The membership of both bodies is prescribed by statute. The University's Charter broadly defines its objectives as:

*'... the maintenance, advancement and dissemination of knowledge by teaching, consultancy and research and otherwise for the provision of appropriate levels of education and training responsive to the well-being and needs of the communities in the South Pacific....'*



**Figure 1 showing twelve member countries of USP**

### **Towards quality online Learning at USP**

There is abundance of literature (for example, Garrison & Anderson 2003; Pearson & Koppi 2002; Harris 1999) and numerous discussions with check lists on what should be an ideal online line platform and that captures the best practices of quality online learning. The added pressure of knowledge based world and demands of internationalization has forced universities to adjust their operating climate ‘where rigor, credibility, accountability and transparency in offering courses for the students are of utmost importance’ McLoughlin & Visser (2003). The current Strategic Plan is seen to be putting adequate measures that would ensure that educational outputs and capabilities are benchmarked against other comparable institutions with international recognition. Harris (1999) suggests a three layer model to ensure quality online learning environment. These are; 1)content layer- that covers the material that the instructor creates; 2)Interface layer- that delivers the contact and includes delivery software such as email, web browser, learning management system; 3) The infrastructure layer- supports the interface and includes the hardware, internet services and network connections (p141). Since learning demands, curriculum content and infrastructure are evolving with rapidity of change in technological and socio-cultural environment, there is a need to monitor, maintain and improve these interfaces. Infrastructure is assumed to play an ‘invisible support role’ but often makes itself known in frustrating ways, which can lead to a poor learning experience (Harris 1999).

Quality learning in the current context is one that satisfies the demand and provides greater support to all students especially those who come from culturally diverse, geographically disperse and economically fragile Pacific Island countries (PICs).

There are considerable positive indications and lots of hope that USP is making the right moves towards online learning. In the past five decades USP has spent a lot of resources on the adoption and promotion of information and communication technologies (ICT) as a tool to make education more accessible to students of its member countries. The 2013-2018 Strategic Plan has put increasing focus on using ICT as a leveraging tool to assist in addressing the human needs and capacities of the regional members countries. More recently, various faculties have been urged to work with the renamed Center for Flexible Learning, which was previously known as Distance and Flexible Learning (DFL). This is because the new flexible mode of learning does not consider separation by distance as an issue. Flexible learning offered through blended/online mode allows learners to learn from wherever they are and their teachers functioning from a virtual learning space. Flexibility in the current context should be in terms of time, place and content. By 2018 all faculties are expected to offer 60% of their undergraduate courses through online mode (USP 2013-2018 Strategic plan p 30), with the hope to widen access, improve curriculum quality and reduce costs. There are also plans to link with Open Educational Resources (OER). However, it is also imperative that the shift is adaptive in terms of matching the contextual needs and characteristics of all stakeholders who use it (Koper and Manderveld 2004) and that there are adequate systems, resources, and measure put in place to ensure that all students are treated equitably and fairly without compromising quality of learning.

## **Purpose**

The paper aims to capture student experiences and perceptions of blended and online learning. The research intends to record some of the specific promises and challenges faced by online students studying through regional USP campuses with regards to access and equity. In addition, it explores the effectiveness of the systems in place to address student needs in the area of access and equity.

## **Research Design**

This paper, based on a small scale research carried out at the University of the South Pacific (USP), tries to illuminate on some of the experiences of students and teachers engaged in blended/online mode learning and teaching and how they perceive quality learning. The study mostly focuses on the perceptions of a 'cohort' of students of a generic online course and draws on the themes of equity, accessibility and inclusivity which are crucial elements of development.

## **Research Question**

What are some of the experiences and preferences of students engaged in learning and teaching of UU204 through blended/online mode?

## **Methodology**

### **The sample**

The sample population represented were undergraduate students, who were engaged in learning and teaching of the university wide, interdisciplinary compulsory course 'Pacific World' (UU204). The course was offered to all students; from both Laucala (main) and the regional campuses using a macro platform called 'Moodle' through online/blended designation. This meant that more than 80% of teaching and learning interaction happened using the UU204 moodle platform. Laucala students had the opportunity to engage in three by one hour face to face tutorial sessions. Regardless of their physical location, all students were given access to a common virtual classroom (UU204 Moodle page), divided in smaller groups of 25 to 30 students. All students were given same assessment tasks and online resources and were assigned to an online teacher, who was responsible to marking assessment tasks as well as monitoring, evaluating and providing feedback on students' progress and performances. The regional

students, who were enrolled through online mode had access to a printed Introduction & Assignment Booklet (I & A) package, which contained a copy of DVD, with selected videos stored, that form part of assessment resources. However, random feedback from students showed that not all regional students were able to obtain I & A package. Even though the regional students were registered to have online mode of access they were offered three satellite tutorials held in weeks 1, 2, 3 and 7 respectively. After week 7, regional students relied solely on communication and discussion in the virtual classroom using asynchronous communication tools such as quick messaging and emails. Those campuses which had enrolment number of twenty five or more had the opportunity to have a face to face tutorial by a visiting online teacher. In semester 1, 2013, students of Lautoka, Vanuatu, Tonga and the Solomon Islands campuses had this privilege. Students from Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru, Labasa and Tokelau did not have a visit from a UU204 teacher as their numbers did not meet the minimum requirement set by the Faculty of Arts, Law and Education. Laucala students had a total of 3 x 1 hour tutorial held in weeks 2, 6 and 12 of the semester.

### **The survey instrument**

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire. An online questionnaire designed using ideas from Conole's (2004) framework for e-learning and the survey was conducted through the UU204 moodle platform. Additionally, questionnaires were also being sent to the students through email. Students who studied the course through main campus were given option to fill in the hard copy of the questionnaire. Each questionnaire had a covering note, which briefly explained the purpose of the study. All responses were anonymous and students were informed that the data was for research purpose only and that the study was guided by University of the South Pacific's research code of human ethics. The survey used likert-scale to obtain student responses on experiences with regards to access and equity, which were gauged using organizational, technological and pedagogical aspects of using ICT and online learning tools.

## Survey Analysis

Response rate was about forty percent with majority of the participants from main campus. All 728 students, who, studied UU204 in semester one were invited to respond to the questionnaire. A total of 290 students chose to respond to the survey.

<b>Campus</b>	<b>Number Responded</b>	<b>Total Number</b>	<b>Percentage Response within Campus</b>	<b>% of total Responses</b>
<b>Emalus</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>Kiribati</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>.7%</b>
<b>Labasa</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>
<b>Laucala</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>579</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>83%</b>
<b>Lautoka</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>3.4%</b>
<b>Marshal</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>.30%</b>
<b>Samoa</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>
<b>Solomon Islands</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>3.5%</b>
<b>Tonga</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>3.1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>728</b>	<b>40%(overall % response)</b>	

The 'Feedback' tool in Moodle provided basic visualization of responses from those Laucala and regional campus students' who chose to respond through the questionnaire that was placed online. All survey data sought, including those obtained through both face to face and Moodle administered questionnaires survey was exported to Microsoft Excel Format. For the purpose of generating a more meaningful analysis and since this was a partly mixed method

design, numerical and text data were separated. SPSS software was used to analyze and interpret quantitative data while thematic analysis was used to analyze and interpret qualitative.

Response on access, equity and support were gauged using the following five key descriptive indicators:

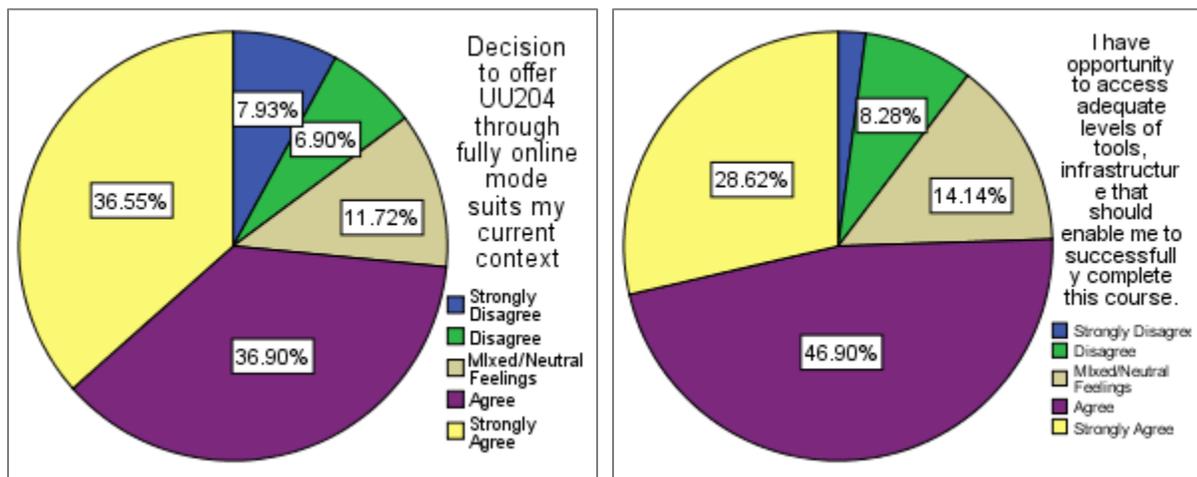
1. Decision to offer UU204 through fully online mode suits my current learning context
2. I have opportunity to access adequate levels of tools, infrastructure that should enable me to successfully complete this course.
3. I have access to regular and reliable internet service from my campus/center
4. Campus/center facilities are adequate for me to solely rely on in order to complete this course successfully
5. Teaching staff is providing adequate support needed to understand and perform required tasks for this course

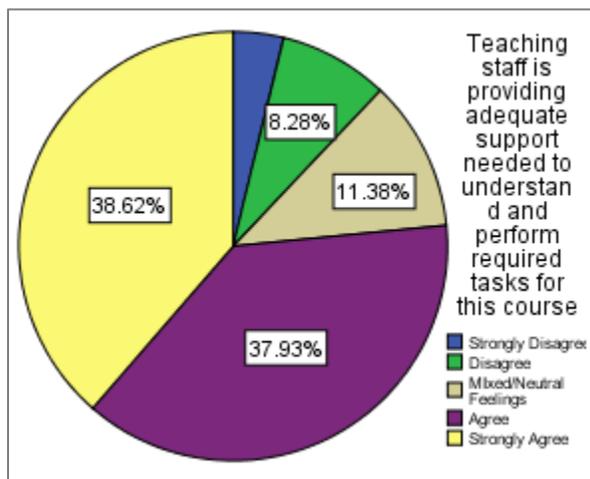
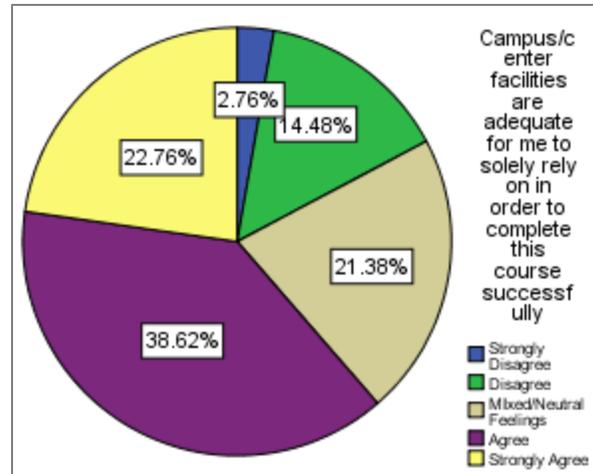
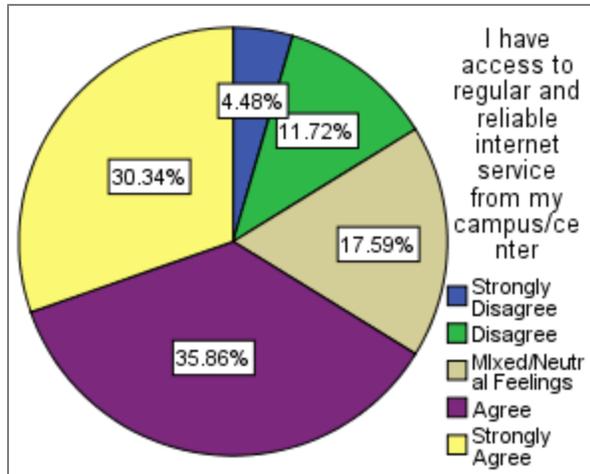
The participants had to choose one of the five likert-scale ratings (1. strongly disagree, 2. disagree, 3. mixed feelings/neutral, 4. Tend to agree, 5. Strongly agree)

## Results

Exploratory data analysis tools were used to present the likert-scale responses in the form of pie charts as follows:

### Pie Charts showing overall percentage response for each descriptive indicators





The above pie charts reveal overall response on students' perceptions with regard to access and equity. The findings indicate that majority, as much as 60%-75% of the respondents considered the organizational, technological and pedagogical support available to them as adequate in enabling them to successfully complete the course ICT and online learning tools. This means that 60%-75% percent of the respondents either agree or strongly agree on all 5 aspects of access and equity. However, since greater portion of the respondents are from Laucala (main) campus, the above analysis provides more like a macro picture. It is assumed that the disparities and inequalities in terms of access and equity are more evident in the regional and outside Laucala campuses. Thus, it was essential to dissect the details from individual campuses for each of the 5 descriptive indicators. The tables are given below.

**Decision to offer UU204 through fully online mode suits my current learning context**

**Crosstabulation**

		Campus									Total
		Emalus	Kiribati	Labasa	Laucala	Lautoka	Marshal	Samoa	Solomons	Tonga	
Strongly Disagree	Count	0	0	0	21	0	0	1	0	1	23
	%	.0%	.0%	.0%	91.3%	.0%	.0%	4.3%	.0%	4.3%	100.0%
Disagree	Count	1	0	0	15	1	0	0	1	2	20
	%	5.0%	.0%	.0%	75.0%	5.0%	.0%	.0%	5.0%	10.0%	100.0%
Mixed/Neutral Feelings	Count	2	0	1	26	3	1	0	0	1	34
	%	5.9%	.0%	2.9%	76.5%	8.8%	2.9%	.0%	.0%	2.9%	100.0%
Agree	Count	1	1	2	91	3	0	0	6	3	107
	%	.9%	.9%	1.9%	85.0%	2.8%	.0%	.0%	5.6%	2.8%	100.0%
Strongly Agree	Count	3	1	2	89	3	0	3	3	2	106
	%	2.8%	.9%	1.9%	84.0%	2.8%	.0%	2.8%	2.8%	1.9%	100.0%
Total	Count	7	2	5	242	10	1	4	10	9	290
	%	2.4%	.7%	1.7%	83.4%	3.4%	.3%	1.4%	3.4%	3.1%	100.0%

**I have opportunity to access adequate levels of tools, infrastructure that should enable me to successfully complete this course.**

**Crosstabulation**

		Campus									Total
		Emalus	Kiribati	Labasa	Laucala	Lautoka	Marshal	Samoa	Solomons	Tonga	
Strongly Disagree	Count	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	6
	%	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
Disagree	Count	0	1	1	13	1	1	1	2	4	24
	%	.0%	4.2%	4.2%	54.2%	4.2%	4.2%	4.2%	8.3%	16.7%	100.0%
Mixed/Neutral Feelings	Count	4	0	0	26	4	0	1	2	4	41
	%	9.8%	.0%	.0%	63.4%	9.8%	.0%	2.4%	4.9%	9.8%	100.0%
Agree	Count	3	1	4	119	4	0	0	5	0	136
	%	2.2%	.7%	2.9%	87.5%	2.9%	.0%	.0%	3.7%	.0%	100.0%

Strongly Agree	Count	0	0	0	78	1	0	2	1	1	83
	%	.0%	.0%	.0%	94.0%	1.2%	.0%	2.4%	1.2%	1.2%	100.0%
Total	Count	7	2	5	242	10	1	4	10	9	290
	%	2.4%	.7%	1.7%	83.4%	3.4%	.3%	1.4%	3.4%	3.1%	100.0%

**I have access to regular and reliable internet service from my campus/center Crosstabulation**

		Campus									Total
		Emalus	Kiribati	Labasa	Laucala	Lautoka	Marshall	Samoa	Solomons	Tonga	
Strongly Disagree	Count	1	0	0	9	0	1	0	1	1	13
	%	7.7%	.0%	.0%	69.2%	.0%	7.7%	.0%	7.7%	7.7%	100.0%
Disagree	Count	2	0	0	22	2	0	2	5	1	34
	%	5.9%	.0%	.0%	64.7%	5.9%	.0%	5.9%	14.7%	2.9%	100.0%
Mixed/Neutral Feelings	Count	3	0	0	37	5	0	1	3	2	51
	%	5.9%	.0%	.0%	72.5%	9.8%	.0%	2.0%	5.9%	3.9%	100.0%
Agree	Count	0	0	4	92	2	0	1	0	5	104
	%	.0%	.0%	3.8%	88.5%	1.9%	.0%	1.0%	.0%	4.8%	100.0%
Strongly Agree	Count	1	2	1	82	1	0	0	1	0	88
	%	1.1%	2.3%	1.1%	93.2%	1.1%	.0%	.0%	1.1%	.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	7	2	5	242	10	1	4	10	9	290
	%	2.4%	.7%	1.7%	83.4%	3.4%	.3%	1.4%	3.4%	3.1%	100.0%

**Campus/center facilities are adequate for me to solely rely on in order to complete this course successfully**

**Cross tabulation**

		Campus									Total
		Emalus	Kiribati	Labasa	Laucala	Lautoka	Marshall	Samoa	Solomons	Tonga	
Strongly Disagree	Count	1	0	0	6	0	1	0	0	0	8
	%	12.5%	.0%	.0%	75.0%	.0%	12.5%	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
Disagree	Count	1	1	1	26	4	0	2	4	3	42
	%	2.4%	2.4%	2.4%	61.9%	9.5%	.0%	4.8%	9.5%	7.1%	100.0%
Mixed/Neutral Feelings	Count	3	0	1	46	4	0	1	4	3	62
	%	4.8%	.0%	1.6%	74.2%	6.5%	.0%	1.6%	6.5%	4.8%	100.0%
Agree	Count	2	0	3	99	2	0	1	2	3	112
	%	1.8%	.0%	2.7%	87.1%	1.8%	.0%	.9%	1.8%	2.7%	100.0%

	%	1.8%	.0%	2.7%	88.4%	1.8%	.0%	.9%	1.8%	2.7%	100.0%
Strongly	Count	0	1	0	65	0	0	0	0	0	66
Agree	%	.0%	1.5%	.0%	98.5%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	7	2	5	242	10	1	4	10	9	290
	%	2.4%	.7%	1.7%	83.4%	3.4%	.3%	1.4%	3.4%	3.1%	100.0%

### Teaching staff is providing adequate support needed to understand and perform required tasks for this course

#### Cross tabulation

		Campus									Total
		Emalus	Kiribati	Labasa	Laucala	Lautoka	Marshall	Samoa	Solomons	Tonga	
Strongly	Count	0	0	0	11	0	0	0	0	0	11
Disagree	%	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
Disagree	Count	0	0	0	20	0	0	0	2	2	24
	%	.0%	.0%	.0%	83.3%	.0%	.0%	.0%	8.3%	8.3%	100.0%
Mixed/Neutral	Count	3	1	0	22	3	0	0	2	2	33
Feelings	%	9.1%	3.0%	.0%	66.7%	9.1%	.0%	.0%	6.1%	6.1%	100.0%
Agree	Count	2	0	3	92	5	1	1	4	2	110
	%	1.8%	.0%	2.7%	83.6%	4.5%	.9%	.9%	3.6%	1.8%	100.0%
Strongly	Count	2	1	2	97	2	0	3	2	3	112
Agree	%	1.8%	.9%	1.8%	86.6%	1.8%	.0%	2.7%	1.8%	2.7%	100.0%
Total	Count	7	2	5	242	10	1	4	10	9	290
	%	2.4%	.7%	1.7%	83.4%	3.4%	.3%	1.4%	3.4%	3.1%	100.0%

#### Campus responses highlights

- All campuses showed positive response towards the current mode of delivery suitable to their contexts ranging from 50- 60% approval from Tonga, Emalus and Lautoka and the rest of the campuses a 60 – 80% agreement.
- Responses from Kiribati and Marshalls islands cannot be used for generalization as the % response is low.
- With regards opportunity to access adequate levels of infrastructure to successfully complete the course, there are mixed responses. Tonga, Emalus and Lautoka are more inclined towards a negative answer, while all other campuses responses are promising. Laucala, Kiribati and Laucala show greater optimism compared to Samoa and Lautoka.

- Solomons, Lautoka and Emalus students' feedback show that regular and reliable internet was an issue at their campuses. 50% or more respondents from Lautoka, Samoa and Solomon campuses show dissatisfaction regarding campus facilities.
- All campuses agree that support from teaching staff was good.
- Laucala campus response draws most positive response with regards to access, equity and support from staff.

## **Discussion**

Student response reveals that student needs with regards to access: equity and support vary in different campuses. Current systems in place to provide additional support to address the issue of access and equity include: allowing flexibility with assignment due dates for regional students, having f2f sessions at Laucala and REACT sessions for the region; providing Assignment and Introduction Booklet and DVDs for regional students and providing f2f tutorial visits for campuses which have 25 or more students. Apart from that the online teachers are encouraged to provide effective and timely response to assignments and student queries. Brief findings from current UU204 teachers suggest that providing effective and detailed feedback for online students with large numbers, in the current context 80-100 students, is far more demanding than traditional face to face classrooms. It was also found out that majority of the students needed more staff support during the early part of the semester and also specifically to understand assignment questions that required research skills. Bayne (2004) found that not all learners find the textual communication with unseen persons useful and many do not feel they have a social presence. Students from the wider regional campuses had the opportunity to attend Remote Education and Communication Technology (REACT) satellite tutorial sessions. However, not all regional students could attend the sessions due to technical difficulties and remote locations.

A majority of the regional campus students felt that presence of a tutor in each campus would provide the additional support needed. Due to funding issues, the faculty felt that it was only viable to provide face to face support to campuses who met the minimum set number. This indicates that countries with smaller population may never get an opportunity to have f2f tutorial

support. The findings of this survey indicate the need for a more accessible design, which provides greater options to meet student satisfaction in the region. Although it is impossible to meet the needs of every online student, USP could consider enhancing access and equity through improved internet connectivity, computer facilities and face to face teacher support for the regional students.

### **Limitations of the findings**

Although the sample captured almost 40 % of the students enrolled for this course, majority of the respondents were from Laucala campus, and hence, the overall quantitative results are governed by Laucala Campus. However, individual responses from all campuses were also tabulated to find out on the ratings of the perceptions and experiences. The campuses where the sample sizes were reasonably low should be targeted to increase the response rates in order to get more reliable statistics. As such, there is obviously a need for more study in the region, a study that would capture a greater percentage of respondents from each campus. In order to get a better picture of the quality of online learning, students need to be tested against a universally accepted checklist. The survey did not seek to generate findings of effectiveness of teaching and learning activities, instructional designs and related instructivist models, which are integral indicators of quality learning. It would also significantly improve the accuracy of the findings if purposefully selected groups of students (focus groups) from all the campuses in the region are targeted using qualitative or face to face interviews to better collect qualitative data. The researcher is based in Laucala and conducted an online questionnaire survey. This introduces bias into the research. A more appropriate design would have been a face-to-face interview implementing a similar mixed methods design – this would enable more accurate and detailed data.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this small scale survey reveal both promising and challenging experiences with online learning within USP context. Generally all campuses show positive

response towards the current mode of blended and online mode of delivery. Laucala campus students, who form a greater proportion of the total respondents, show most satisfaction towards the current mode of delivery, tools, support and infrastructure provided. Responses from the Solomon Islands, Lautoka and Emalus Campuses reveal greater dissatisfaction towards campus facilities even though they show optimism towards the current mode of delivery. Majority of the students from outside Laucala campus face mobility and financial constraints because of personal circumstances and thus they value freedom from time and place. Students' experiences and perceptions from outside main campus vary and this obviously reflects the diverse learning needs of USPs member countries. Although identifying the diverse and varying needs of the diverse student population is beyond the scope of this paper, it is possible that experiences of a small portion of blended and online students can assist in developing strategies that could assist in addressing online teaching and learning in the area of access and equity within the USP.

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