USP’S RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

The University of the South Pacific (USP) resumed its classes remotely on April 20 due to COVID-19 Pandemic. From the time of remote teaching, USP has taken a number of effective actions to deliver students their education successfully. Nearly 95% of all USP’s Semester 1 courses are now being delivered remotely via the online Moodle learning and teaching platform.

Critical Actions taken by USP

Prior to the first case of COVID-19 announced in Fiji on 19 March, USP took precautions and released its COVID-19 Pandemic Management Plan 2020 on 12 March 2020. The same day WHO officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The plan outlines the various response measures of the University based on prevailing conditions at the campuses and outlines the roles of those involved in implementing key response activities.

The University had to also take a decision to cancel the Medal and Prizes Ceremony as well as the March Graduation at Laucala campuses. While these two important events were cancelled students were given the certificates, diplomas and degree, with the option that they can formally take part in September 2020 graduation.

The Mid Semester break was extended till April 20 due to lockdown and student were allowed to go back to their country. For the safety of the USP students, all recreational facilities including the gym, swimming pool and playgrounds at Laucala Campus are closed until further notice. All meetings for USP comprising of more than twenty people is being conducted via Zoom. The security guards have been checking all incoming visitors at the end points in the campus with the Thermometer Guns.

Challenges for USP

A major challenge has been to ensure that the courses which are designed to be taught face-to-face are converted appropriately so that these can be delivered remotely. Fortunately, with USP’s time-tested experience in flexible learning and teaching since 1970, the University was able to convert, within a short period, 253 face-to-face courses, to online modes, whilst meeting the required minimal standard of online learning and teaching delivery.

USP has had a very long history in flexible learning and teaching, which include delivering purely online courses. The University’s Centre for Flexible Learning (CFL) is fully devoted to the professional development of online courses. CFL was even more engaged in supporting interactions between the teaching staff and the students and is monitoring daily student participation levels. Virtual tutorials and lab sessions are replacing face-to-face discussions including mentoring sessions and lab activities.

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Actions undertaken for students’ education remotely

All faculties and Pacific TAFE have been disseminating key information regarding courses through social media, webpage, Tukutuku mail, and media outlets. The Vice Chancellor and President has also been disseminating important information to the students through his monthly and special vlogs. Course Coordinators are devoting additional time to answer students’ queries, whether by live chat, phone, or email. CFL ran a series of online workshops to give guidance to students on how to achieve highly in online learning. Other sections of the University (such as the library, the Disability Resource Centre and the Counselling Centre) continued to offer their services.

Under the guidance of the Acting DVC Education, Professor Jito Vanualailai, the Learning and Teaching (L&T) Continuity Team monitors and reports on weekly online participation of students and staff, and intervene as needed. The team has worked towards students’ education engagement and the quality of USP’s studies transmitted remotely. It has also been working with the Course Coordinators whose courses were yet to reach 80% readiness and re-installed the SMS capability in Moodle, so that the University can immediately have access to all the students via Moodle SMS. The team has developed a short questionnaire to gauge if students have sufficient resources to access the online materials.

The University introduced a Call-free number, 1568 for all Fiji carriers from any Digicel, Vodafone or Telecom Fiji phone from 15 May, 2020. The students were made aware that they could re-join classes via Moodle, and were being provided help by our Call Centre team on the spot. The Call-free service has been solely developed for students to easily access information, including enquiries regarding Semester 2. The USP Call Centre is operational Monday-Friday from 8am to 8pm and on Saturdays from 11am to 4pm. Negotiations are ongoing to have the same initiative operational in other member countries.

USP has opened all the Campuses, region-wide, from 8am to at 8pm, Monday to Friday and 8am to 5pm on Saturday. Important facilities are open to facilitate online learning and teaching. These include the computer labs and libraries. These facilities have incorporated appropriate COVID-19 restrictions such as social distancing and other requirements of member Governments.

Lauca Campus computer spaces are adapted to observe social distancing provisions. Computer labs that used to have forty computers were halved to observe COVID-19 protocols and to ensure students have adequate space to study and access their courses. All computer labs are dedicated to students and some include sitting space to accommodate students using Wi-Fi hotspots. Five (5) computer labs (ITS3, ITS4, ITS5, ITS8 and 9) are open until 8pm to cater for working students. Sixty computers (60) have been relocated to the USP gym due to available space and proximity of handwashing stations. These spaces and facilities are being widely used by students.

USP also took the initiative to make available 700 tablets to its students who do not have access to learning tools from home. From the initial set of data USP received, about 89% of the students have some electronic equipment or gadget such as Laptop/PC, Tablet, or Smart Phone. Approximately half of the tablets were distributed among the Fiji campuses (Laucala, Lautoka and Labasa). The distribution is managed by the USP Library at these campuses. The distribution ensures everyone has a fair chance to education and equal learning experience.

Accessing important USP internet sites and Moodle are free for students in Fiji, Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue and Vanuatu on either Digicel and/or Vodafone network. USP is pursuing this initiative with internet providers in other member countries as well.

If students cannot submit assessment materials online, then they can submit hardcopies at their respective Campus or at a central repository if students cannot access their Campus. Lecturers and tutors have been flexible with due dates of assignments. The University has also extended the deadline for payment of fee to the end of the semester.

Number of Students Withdrawal due to challenges faced through Remote Teaching

Due to the current circumstances, as of Sunday 31st May 2020, 861 students have withdrawn from 1,332 courses. This is equivalent to 3.2% of Semester 1 students withdrawing from 1.84% of the courses. There are also students who have not logged in Moodle from the time COVID-19 started due to various reasons. These numbers are still being finalised. The University is making every effort to encourage students to connect remotely. The course coordinators are reaching out to these students as well.

Make Education Your Priority

If you have any difficulty in accessing your Moodle shell, or any issue at all that may be preventing you from continuing your classes, please contact us.

USP CALL CENTRE
Mondays – Fridays from 8am-8pm
Saturday from 11am-4pm

CALL FREE on 1568
from any Digicel, Vodafone or Telecom Fiji phone

Email: helpdesk@student.usp.ac.fj;
moodlehelp@usp.ac.fj
or evonne.inia@usp.ac.fj

REGIONAL STUDENTS can contact their Campus Directors:
www.usp.ac.fj/campuses for assistance.

The continuous assessments in your courses are being designed flexibly, so it is not too late to resume.
EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEACHING – A SHIFT FROM THE NORM

The COVID-19 pandemic has created many disruptions. For the education sector, it has challenged our mindsets – of how we will deliver learning and teaching in future. It has manifested a new way of working and the necessity to evolve rapidly.

Many institutions globally have quickly shifted their face-to-face teaching to a mix of modalities, what we call the Emergency Response Teaching (ERT).

Unlike learning interactions that are planned and designed to be online, ERT is a temporary change from instructional delivery to alternative delivery in times of crisis.

It requires the use of different approaches and tools that would be effective to reach learners in different geographic settings, keeping in mind that such delivery modality will return to normal once the emergency is over.

The intention of any ERT is to provide materials and learning support to ensure continuity of education and student engagement.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) mooted radio and TV lessons for school students. Supplementary materials were populated on the MOE website. Teachers were required to prepare activity worksheets and email to parents. Printed materials were also provided for pickup from schools.

The ERT took many different forms which included printed materials, emails, radio and TV programmes, online videos, live online lectures and tutorials, telephone calls, and email to parents. Printed materials were also provided for pickup from schools.

A concern that has emerged amid this crisis is the quality of learning and teaching and the impact on student learning outcomes. Education commentators are debating whether ERT will compromise education quality. It should be noted that ERT is a crisis response strategy – a short-term measure that will end when we get back to normal. One must also note the enormous efforts by education systems around the world trying to provide quality education such difficult times.

It is important to remember that courses developed during a crisis should not be mistaken with professionally designed eLearning courses or as permanent solutions to replace face-to-face teaching.

While online and digital learning is central to the ERT strategy, the quality of pedagogy and delivery depends on the capacity of the institution. It depends on the institution’s online learning infrastructure, its capability in designing quality eLearning, and the ability of its personnel to create, facilitate, and manage delivery.

Simply having a Learning Management System (LMS) and dumping resources on it is not enough. Online courses require tactful design where learner experience takes the centre stage. The process involves subject matter experts, educational technologists, instructional designers, web programmers, and video creators.

The development of an online course requires careful course design, engages the best possible tools to obtain the best learning; depending on the subject matter. There has been extensive research carried out and published globally on the use of online courses, effectiveness of online tools and extensive learning analytics. In addition, online courses can engage self-paced, synchronous and asynchronous learning that also includes active online student engagement. Academics (subject matter specialists) work closely with Education Technologist to convert contents into effective learning and assessment options for students. It is commonly known that the development of an online course could take between 6 to 9 months.

That being said, the teaching profession was put under a lot of pressure to upend their way of working - school teachers, tutors, lecturers, and professors alike. Teachers were required to utilize various forms on non-traditional instruction, many for the first time. Such change requires major adjustments.

A recent survey of 600 HEI in the US shows that 97% of the institutions did not have staff with adequate online teaching experience. This would be the case in many HEIs, and more so in our schools.

The success of ERT also depends on students’ access to the internet. This is a challenge in many Pacific Island Countries (PIC’s), where we face issues of internet access and speed. Fiji is in a better position with much higher internet penetration than other PIC’s. Fijian telecommunication companies have been generous in providing free domain access and other packages for students to access learning resources. For other PIC’s which have dispersed geography and limited telecommunications infrastructure, reaching students is difficult.

Student experience with ERT will certainly vary depending on the country and their location within a country, their socioeconomic status, ICT provisions within the country and their ability to engage fully in their studies.

It is critical that students get the support and assurance from their families, friends and institutions to ensure that they remain engaged in their studies throughout the duration of this ERT for successful completion of studies.

This is certainly an experience in all our lives that we will never forget and in some way, we hope an experience that will have taught us some valuable lessons – lessons that will make us better educators.
The University of the South Pacific’s (USP) Pacific Technical and Further Education (PacTAFE) is taking measures to cushion the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Fijian organisations and their workforce by encouraging them to adapt and grow in this current state by increasing up-skilling and re-skilling efforts.

Professor Pal Ahluwalia, the Vice-Chancellor and President, USP launched the training stimulus package, online training platform and first ever non-time based delivery of Certificate IV in Information Technology (support) at Pacific TAFE’s Workforce Development Training Unit (WDTU) in Walu Bay.

The training Stimulus Package is an initiative to encourage employers to continue increasing human capital development during this economic slowdown period. The Training Stimulus Package aims to assist Fijian enterprises to retain and gain talents.

The Certificate IV in Information Technology’s online platform will be unique delivery as students can start anytime and finish anytime and not to be attached to semester or trimester.

Professor Ahluwalia while delivering his address said that Fiji and the rest of the world were facing unprecedented change due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“As industry partner, we have seen first-hand the impact of this health crisis on Fijian organisations. Given this situation, we see that there is an opportunity to support organisations in this turbulent time,” he said.

“To minimise business disruption and adhere to social distancing guidelines, the Training Stimulus Package will be offered through an online platform. Pacific TAFE’s Online Training Platform will give employers access to Fiji’s largest library of online training courses.”

Professor Ahluwalia added that the Online Training Platform offers over 300 courses that the Fijian workforce can access from the comfort of their office or home.

“The total cost for 300-course library will be $10,000. There are other lower package deals for small businesses and individuals,” he said.

Professor Ahluwalia stressed that users from anywhere in the world will be able to enroll in the Certificate IV in Information Technology (Support) and complete a qualification from USP and the Certificate IV of Information Technology develops the underpinning knowledge and skills for the Diploma in Information Technology programme.

Meanwhile, Professor Jito Vanualailai, Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) said that the regional countries need IT support specialists/technicians in the future as we respond to changing business, education, health and environmental challenges.

“In this ever-changing global environment, our community require resilience and adaptability – skills that are proving to be essential to navigate effectively through this pandemic,” Professor Vanualailai said.

“Looking into the future, some of the most important skills that employers will be looking for will be creativity, communication and collaboration, alongside empathy and emotional intelligence; and being able to work across demographic lines of differences to harness the power of the collective through effective teamwork.”

He added that the training initiative will facilitate the continuity of education for all through remote learning and as a result enterprises will gain a competitive advantage once the economy recovers.

He said that this pandemic is reshaping thinking and business culture and tertiary education is not spared. The cheapest deal is to help organisations to invest in training while sustaining business in this trying time.
In the Pacific we aspire to endurance and sustainability. But progress is difficult to sustain when we face multiple threats that reverse decades of development gains in a matter of hours or days.

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens the integrity and prosperity of our Blue Pacific peoples, our communities and our economies. I respect and admire the leadership demonstrated by Members of the Pacific Islands Forum and the global community in their responses to this evolving crisis. Many Forum and other countries have put in place unprecedented measures to protect the health and livelihoods of their people, including major economic stimulus packages.

Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers agreed to establish the ‘Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 (PHP-C)’ under the Biketawa Declaration, to collectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PHP-C is a high-level, political mechanism to ensure regional coordination. It will expedite assistance and cooperation between Pacific countries in preparing for and responding to COVID-19. This includes facilitating the provision of timely and safe medical and humanitarian assistance from regional and international development partners, across our Blue Pacific continent.

It is important to emphasise the interconnectivity between the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Cyclone Harold is a clear example that climate change induced disasters can exacerbate the COVID-19 crisis in our Blue Pacific continent. For instance, an already struggling small public system that has closed its borders under COVID-19 may now have to respond to the impacts of Cyclone Harold and the dilemma of opening its borders for external assistance.

Just as our region consolidates its collective effort to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, we must also face the devastating damage in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga and loss of life caused by Cyclone Harold. This climate change exacerbated disaster is a stark reminder that notwithstanding the current threats and impacts of COVID-19, climate change remains the biggest threat facing humanity today. We must not lose sight of this reality. The COVID-19 public health emergency and its ensuing humanitarian and economic fallout offers us a glimpse of what the global climate change emergency can become – if it is left unchecked and if we do not act now.

The effects of climate change should no longer be the subject of an acrimonious political debate where lines are drawn in the sand between the left and right of the political spectrum. The State of the Global Climate in 2019 Report recently released by the World Meteorological Organisation confirms that the world has now surpassed 1.1°C of global warming above pre-industrial levels, and that severe cyclones and storms will be the new norm this decade.

While this year’s twenty-sixth Conference of the Parties (COP 26) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change has been deferred to 2021 due to COVID-19, the global community must not delay the necessary climate action required of us in 2020. We need to limit the global average temperature rise to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to achieve 1.5°C, as Pacific countries have consistently advocated for.

Our Pacific Leaders continue to be proactive in the global fight against climate change, following the issuing of their strongest ever climate change declaration last year – the Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Change Action Now. We are now facing COVID-19. Our world is interconnected, and the impacts of transboundary issues are unavoidable. The year 2020 will no doubt test our Blue Pacific’s resilience.

This is an opportunity for our region and for the world at large to consider climate-smart response and recovery measures. Over the months and years to come, economies will recover. This is a chance for nations to plan better, to include the most vulnerable in those plans, and to shape 21st century economies and societies in ways that are healthy, clean, safe and more resilient.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the climate change crises are cross-cutting – both require a holistic and whole-of-government approach. They are crises that also require governments to reach out to civil society and the private sector as integrated innovative solutions are needed.

As we continue the fight against COVID-19 and as we prepare for COP 26, countries must review and strengthen their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and seek to integrate health priorities and financing into their revised NDC commitments, which are expected this year. Now is also the time for countries to develop long-term low emissions development strategies. As one global community, we must use the opportunity of COP 26 for a discussion and commitment on building back climate-smart societies and economies. Governments, businesses, families and individuals across our Blue Pacific, and indeed our great Blue Planet, are facing the most challenging of times.

While the Pacific region emits a negligible fraction of global greenhouse gas emissions, our Blue Pacific is vulnerable and will suffer from the ‘tragedy of the commons’ if industrialised nations do not heed the warnings and curb their emissions to acceptable limits as set out in the Paris Agreement. Climate change is a threat to all of mankind and must be addressed with the urgent attention and resourcing that it deserves. The Pacific Islands Forum will continue to play its part in strengthening the resilience of the Pacific region, our countries, our communities and our peoples. We are all in this together. We will and we must come out stronger.
THE CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE HELD 19TH “CHINESE BRIDGE” COMPETITION ONLINE

On May 20, 2020, the qualifying competition for the 19th “Chinese Bridge”- Fiji division rounded off in Suva through online form. This was hosted by the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Fiji and co-organised by the Confucius Institute at The University of the South Pacific (CI-USP).

Affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, this year’s competition could not be conducted on stage. The Organising Committee decided to select eight candidates by online Q&A session and video submission.

The participants joined this competition to showcase their Chinese Language proficiency and knowledge on culture.

The champion, Sharon Levula will get the opportunity to travel to China to compete in the final with candidates from universities around the world once COVID-19 Pandemic situation eases. She also got a scholarship to study for half a year at a Chinese university.

The second prize winner, Yashna Nand got the chance to travel to China as an observer to learn from other candidates.

Dr Akanisi Kedrayate, Dean of Faculty of Arts, Law and Education USP, presented the certificates and prizes and congratulated the eight participants for participating.

The competition was divided into three parts: Q & A, speech and talent display. On 14 May, the Organising Committee used ZOOM to connect the 8 candidates from Laucala and Lautoka Campuses. The Organising Committee also arranged the question numbers, and the candidates chose one question number to answer. The questions in the Q & A session covered China’s national conditions, Fijian culture, and cross-cultural communication.

The candidates recorded their speech on the theme of “One World, One Family” and they recounted their Chinese language learning story and their fortunes with Chinese language, showing immense talent.

The “Chinese Bridge” builds a bridge for the Chinese youth learners around the world to communicate with Chinese culture. CI-USP also undertakes the responsibility of promoting the benign cultural intersection between China and Fiji. CI-USP has been undertaking the “Chinese Bridge” competition for seven times. The undertaking of the “Chinese Bridge” not only provided Chinese language learners in Fiji with a platform to demonstrate their own Chinese learning achievements, but also built a bridge for in-depth cultural exchange between the young generation of China and Fiji.

IF YOU ARE FEELING UNWELL, OR KNOW SOMEONE WHO IS FEELING UNWELL AND IS SHOWING SYMPTOMS, PLEASE CONTACT YOUR RESPECTIVE HEALTH SERVICES.
STAFF PROFILE

Most memorable moment at USP?
Those unforgettable days of eating noodles, bread and tuna during my Uni days and my first day back at USP – Emalus Campus, not as a student but as a staff of the University.

Best part about your job?
My work includes the processing of documents (digital & hardcopy) for publication on PacLII website. I am part of a team referred to as the “Engine Room”. I have enjoyed being part of the Engine Room team from the day I started work. So, the best of my job is knowing that what we process and publish today will be made accessible on the same day free of charge.

Favourite thing about USP.
USP provides a diverse culture and background of students & staffs from around the Pacific and international countries as well. I made a lot friends whilst studying at USP and I believe through USP, students and staffs are able to use as a platform for networking for our leaders of tomorrow.

What has been your favourite project at USP?
Imagine doing research in the absence of PacLII in this day and age? PacLII is my favourite project here at USP because had it not been for this project, access to law resources will be very costly and time consuming. One of our core function is to add value to the product we receive from our suppliers and to publish these law materials for free public access. PacLII provides historical documents and an updated access to the Pacific Regions law materials for our judges, practitioners, academics and students in the Pacific Region and other users worldwide.

What do you like most about your Campus?
I love the work culture here at Emalus, everyone is friendly be it an academic, an Administrative staff or a cleaner/grounds man, we are the “vuvale” or family of Emalus Campus!

Best advice you have ever been given?
In life, there will be good and bad days. Embrace the good days and when facing a bad day, don’t quit, stay focused on your goal and work on being a better version of yourself the next day!

Where did you receive your qualifications?
University of the South Pacific (LLB, PDLP, POLD).

STUDENT PROFILE

Why did you choose USP?
For quality tertiary education.

What are your career goals?
Aspiring to join a recognised institution in my field of study in order to get experience.

Preferred mode of study?
Face-to-Face mode of study as it allows direct interaction with course staff on a regular basis.

Which course have you enjoyed the most? Why?
Highly enjoyed all my courses whether it be Accounting, IS or even UU courses because each has provided a unique learning experience.

Describe how you feel about studying on your campus?
It feels delightful to study in a diverse cultural environment.

Three words to describe USP QUALITY, INCLUSIVENESS AND BALANCED.

Where do you see yourself 5-10 years from now?
Serving the community and the business environment with the valuable knowledge gained at USP.

What extra-curricular activities are you involved in?
Currently a Senior Peer Mentor at FBE SLS, Residential Assistant at the Halls of Residence Office, AFSA Executive Member within USP and other voluntary initiative outside USP. I strongly encourage students to get involved in extra-curricular activities as it teaches essential life skills.

Do you prefer to work as part of a group or alone? Why?
Mostly prefer to work as part of a group because it fosters creativity and accommodates peer learning. This also enhances teamwork skills which essential in every work environment.

How is USP preparing you for the future?
By allowing me to grow academically as well as socially in terms of embracing the unique identity and culture of our beloved region.

What is your advice to other students?
To respect the opportunity of studying at the University of the South Pacific and learn with great interest and commitment. We all have a responsibility of giving back to our parents, sponsors, teachers and the community at large, so study with determination as a responsible student.
REVISED ACADEMIC CALENDAR YEAR

SEMESTER 1, 2020

20 April – 05 June: 
Rest of Semester 1, 2020, dedicated to teaching & learning activities

08 June – 12 June: 
Study/Assessment Week

15 June – 26 June: 
Examination/ Assessment Weeks

29 June – 10 July: 
Grades submitted

MID-SEMESTER BREAK
26 June - 02 August

SEMESTER 2, 2020 COMMENCES
3 AUGUST

TRIMESTER 1, 2020

4 May – 15 May: 
Trimester 1 Break

Before 15 May: 
Final Exam/ Assessment

18 May: 
Trimester 2, 2020, starts.

Despite COVID-19 Pandemic, I continued my education at USP, through its excellent remote teaching platform, which kept me up to date with my semester 1 courses. I encourage students including those who may have missed out in Semester 1, to enrol in Semester 2, for continuity of their education. USP provides the confidence in the pursuit of your tertiary education goals.

ENROL NOW FOR SEMESTER 2, 2020

OBTAIN QUALITY EDUCATION

Realising opportunities

Don’t miss out on your dream for higher education.

E: helpdesk@student.usp.ac.fj
CALL TOLL FREE ON 1568 (for Fiji)

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