

ISSUES IN DISTANCE & FLEXIBLE LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC: REMOTE STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Abstract:

The current definition of DFL is the acquisition of learning through a flexible approach, especially for those that are employed and those who have long been out of the formal classroom. According to the Acting Vice-Chancellor of the USP, Dr Esther Williams, USP is recognized throughout the Commonwealth for its **innovative and effective application of appropriate learning technologies in distance education.** (*DFL Handbook, 2008*). Despite the fact that the University's extension service has been around for decades, nonetheless the reality of current and past circumstances have shown that a certain section of the target group, isolated islander students of the USP region, face enormous challenges in accessing education through DFL mode. These include logistics, resources (personnel & materials), delivery, academic support services and how they impact on effective learning. In addition are the implications of these issues for the university itself as well as regional governments that financially support the USP. It is from this perspective that this paper sets out to throw light on the issues affecting students' academic performance and satisfaction and the reflection upon the University as a recognized regional institution. It is imperative that the USP, through its DFL arm acknowledges and accommodates the specific needs of islander students and the ramifications these challenges would entail in the longer term.

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A lot of the contents of this paper are based on my personal experiences as Coordinator for 2 USP Sub-centres in Vanuatu including a brief interlude (1 year) as national coordinator of USP College for Foundation Studies, based at Emalus Campus – one of the 3 main campuses of the University of the South Pacific. These experiences in the form of personal notes and communications with colleagues range over a period of 10 years and I would like to faithfully acknowledge the following persons of whom I have shared many of these experiences as well as consulted for their invaluable thoughts on some of the issues raised in the context of this paper.

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THANK YOU



USP logo: symbolic of unity in diversity

Preamble:

Considering the current definition for Distance & Flexible Learning (DFL) at the University of the South Pacific (USP), students can expect a flexible approach to learning enabling them to fit their study around work and personal commitments. As such, it promises remote regional students a convenient way of learning that is not constrained by the rigid time and teacher demands of the formal classroom. This makes DFL study, for many, the only opportunity for access to education that they unable to obtain through the formal system.

There is also the enticing knowledge that students can go at their own paces. Furthermore, because studying is done privately, failures and associated embarrassments are hidden from the community. The icing on the cake for many is the fact that they will be accessing training and education through a prestigious learning institution such as the University of the South Pacific.

So, have things happened according to expectations?

Once in the system, students become aware that delivering education at a distance in the context of the USP has its unique challenges. Generally, the scope of flexibility has shortcomings in the various aspects of the university's DFL programme, the logistics involved and in student support services. A brief

description of the geography of the USP, and in particular the multi-island nature of its member countries is a necessary background to provide context to the discussion of its impact on the DFL programme of USP.

I. The Uniqueness of the USP Regional Network:

The USP covers a vast area of the Pacific Ocean from the Marshall Islands in the north Pacific to Cook Islands in the farthest south (see Fig. 1 below). Twelve Island states make up the membership of the university and each government makes a contribution towards the current budget of the university.



Figure 1: Map showing the 12 USP member countries.

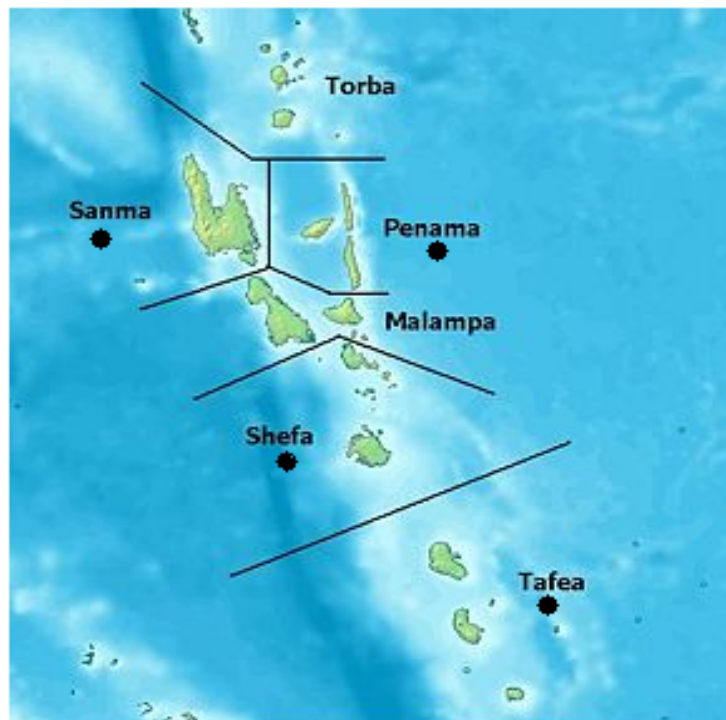
The vast distances provide a strong challenge for the university's DFL extension network in the delivery of education to its member countries. In order to manage the challenges the university created and established Campuses within each member countries. In addition each member country established outer-island Sub-centres in select outer islands where student numbers warrant, except for Vanuatu where the six island provinces

each have an outer centre. The Sub-centres enable the effective management of dispersed distance students in circumstances of poor transport and communication systems.

In Vanuatu, several Sub-centres have been set up through memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and partnerships with local provincial government councils. The policy enhances the partnership between the government and the USP in the provision of education to remote students in remote places – taking the heartbeat of the University to people at the grassroots, so to speak.

Vanuatu has a main campus in the capital Vila, called Emalus Campus. It has so far established 3 Sub-centres (now called ‘Learning centres’) and is currently looking to formalize the establishment of another. Tafea, Santo and Penama learning centres have been operating for several years and now Malampa Learning Centre is soon to open its doors (see Fig.2 below).

Vanuatu's 6 Provinces



In these partnerships most local authorities provide infrastructure sometimes

free of charge to make sure the indigenous people have access to DFL study opportunities and support.

The challenges on the ground for USP staff is to ensure that outreach facilities are fully utilized and that support expected by students is provided to ensure quality performance by the students. Another important aspect in these partnerships is the sense of joint “ownership” of learning centres, it ensures that some overhead costs are removed and the learning centres are able to concentrate on taking care of student needs.

Challenging the ‘flexible’ in DFL

1. Logistics

Sub-centres, e.g. the Santo Learning Centre, cater for students who are either residing in or around the town area. Beyond Emalus, and the Sub-centres there are students who have to travel across the sea or mountainous terrain to reach the centres. Many aspiring students are also unable to afford their studies or its support, and are also challenged by community and other commitments. The distances between islands in Vanuatu present communication and transportation difficulties, faced constantly by students studying through the DFL mode. The archipelago stretches from north to south for almost 2,000km and consists of 80 islands and 90 languages (Tamtam: 2008) with a highly mobile population.

Photo 1:



Santo Learning Centre – funded by AusAid

With these distances, compounded by poor and irregular road and sea transport and lack of modern communication facilities, students in more remote locations are badly disadvantaged. Campuses and sub-centres where provisions in varying degrees for the support of students are located, serve the needs of less than half the DFL student population in some cases, but in many areas especially Vanuatu, there are greater numbers in outer islands.

2. Learning challenges of the DFL students

- Services and facilities provided at the central campuses for DFL students include computer labs, audio and video conferencing, library and face-to-face tutorials. In most sub-centres such services and facilities are unavailable or due to cost of provision, or inaccessible to students due to distance or cost of transport.
- Aside from the services and facilities, students bring their own challenges to their studies. Vanuatu students speak one or more of the 3 official languages of the country: English, French and Bislama, as well as their mother tongue and related dialects, but are expected to perform at the same level as other DFL students. Many are mature students returning to

studies after many years and lacking in confidence. There are fewer women than men because priority is given to males for limited study opportunity as a matter of culture.

A serious challenge for the DFL programme is its diverse student body. In the outer islands staff are not skilled in providing assistance across this diversity. Currently the DFL programme does not provide for the induction of new students or the gradual re-assimilation of mature students into the academic studies.

Photo 2:



Mature students at Santo Learning Centre.

- In the attempt to minimize inefficiency in the outer learning centres USP hiring policy requires that candidates hold university degrees in their subject areas and preferably with education or teacher training. Nearly all such qualified people will be found in the urban and central areas of the country where the civil service is located and private and public sector jobs can be found. It is unavoidable that in the more remote parts of the country, less qualified candidates undertake the tasks of meeting learning support needs of the students. This, of course, has quality implications for the learning that the student is experiencing.

Meeting the challenges: some recommendations for improvement

1. Course Materials & Delivery

Given the expectations that remote students have of DFL opportunities for study, the university is faced with the challenge of overcoming the immense logistical and administrative odds to ensure that it maintains timely delivery of its course materials and appropriate student support.

The University has to be applauded for carrying on its DFL programme despite challenges discussed above but the fact is that it often compromises the quality of learning by students in the process.

Photo 3:



A student about to withdraw – late arrival of CMs

Of utmost importance is course materials dispatch & delivery. For an islander student nothing is more unsettling than missing or late course books and accessories. The DFL policy states that all materials should be received within 3 weeks of the start of semester failing which a student is advised to withdraw from his/her course(s). Constant disappointment is experienced by DFL students both isolated and within reach of campuses through failure to receive materials in time for which they had made up-front payments as required by the enrolment process. The problem has been prolonged to the point where students no longer accept explanations of distance and poor transportation as appropriate excuses.

A suggestion to partly resolve this issue is that DFL services are decentralized and campuses and centres have some autonomy in meeting student needs. Material production & distribution and programme design & implementation are some areas for autonomy.

2. Resources/Facilities

Santo, as a sub-centre, is not fully equipped with the facilities and services provided for DFL students at Emalus. So what alternative measures are available to students who still expect support? Two initiatives are suggested to assist with meeting this need:

- Setting up an advisory committee consisting of important education & training stakeholders within the province to advise and support the hiring of a full-time IT person to network and service the centre's computer lab as well as teach Community & Continuing Education programmes to students and interested members of the public.
- Equip Santo Learning Centre with a science laboratory to sit 8-12 students (Preliminary/Foundation students). This will help curb the current migration to Port Vila to study Science. Indirect benefits will be keeping island students away from the distractions or town life and keeping the young students in their home environment where their study can be properly nurtured.
- *Efforts are being made to ensure that only applicants with good passes in English, with better chances of succeeding, will be admitted into DFL Programmes.*

3. Eligibility Procedures

Often in DFL, procedures governing eligibility & admission into programmes are not strictly adhered to. There is a need to compile statistical data on admission

and failure rates as related to outcomes to short-circuiting established procedures. At registration and counseling it is usual for a DFL student to receive counseling by more than one person and get several variations to the one question posed. In addition diagnostic tests established to check for skills proficiency is often by-passed or totally ignored by those providing counseling. This contributes to students' lack of regard for set procedures and therefore their perception of the system as more of a hindrance than pointing [them] in the right direction.

SASS (Student Academic Support Services) management and Learning Centres can be more effective in controlling issues of enrolment and quality academic performance because they are more familiar with student circumstances at the local level, they (SASS) will be more able to adopt a more targeted approach to set procedures in regards to students' circumstances. Potential DFL students would then be forced to adopt a similar respect for policies as set down by administration.

4. Personnel

Pertinent to distant student circumstances is the quality of professionals employed by DFL operations to provide academic support through learning centres. These circumstances are culture-based and therefore unique and must be taken into account to ensure that student support is relevant and meaningful. Personnel employed at Sub-centres must acquire skills of working with this particular group bearing in mind that these students are expected to perform at the same standards expected of those doing full-time face to face programme. The DFL employees who administer and coordinate need to be specially attuned to the nature of students they are dealing with.

Photo 4:



Vanuatu DFL & SASS Staff

Tutors and trainers providing academic nurturing must be chosen with care; generally in Vanuatu, tutors are professionals in their field but not necessarily trained to aid learning. These tutors not evaluated for effective teaching skills, they partly shoulder the responsibility when students perform poorly. Although DFL administration specifically stipulates conditions through its tutor advertisements, it still accepts less qualified tutors generally (perhaps an unfortunate circumstance of Vanuatu) because of the lack of eligible candidates and strong demand by students to have tutorials.

Implications for the University at large:

Currently many students entering full-time studies at USP, started out as DFL students and now it is the expectation for (some) regional governments and

scholarship units (Vanuatu case; A. Tatangis, pers. Comm., April, 2008) to require students from the USP Continuing Education programmes & High Schools to do first university studies through DFL mode. Consequently many graduates will have had a DFL beginning and their quality as continuing students and graduates will depend on their experiences as DFL students. Attracting scholarships is the desire of many a struggling islander student, knowing full well that their competitive strength to enter one of the 3 Campuses of the USP will depend on how well they performed in the first year as DFL students.

Students who have experienced the best in DFL mode of study can be expected to excel. However, many who have passed to full-time studies have only just managed to get accepted and face enormous difficulties (A. Thyna, pers. Comm., July, 2006), some failing to live up to expectations, a situation they can trace back to the lack of compatibility between the quality of learning in the main campus courses and that of its DFL programme.

Implications for DFL students:

It is easy for students to lose trust in this study alternative if DFL does not improve on its delivery. The average income for the Ni-Vanuatu student is VT20,000 (P.Napwatt, pers. Comm., March, 2008), because they value educational opportunities, they are prepared to spend a substantial amount of hard-earned income in DFL studies as they believe this leads to an improved chance of acquiring a better quality of life through better jobs (T.Waki, pers. Comm., April, 2008).

To lose the drive and motivation to study is, in real life terms, to push people to other less positive and constructive alternatives in lifestyles, contributing to an environment for deteriorating moral and community values and self-worth. Because they have been denied development opportunities promised by the Vision & Mission statements (USP Charter) of the university it is natural that DFL students should feel that some, if not most of the responsibility of the unsatisfactory results, must be borne by the USP.

The need therefore for quality performance audit is timely to reveal areas, as

discussed in this paper, badly in need of improvement, to assist the University to provide the quality of DFL that will correspond to the increase in quality performance of students in the region.

Photo 5:



Waiting patiently for service at Santo Learning Centre

National Implications - Vanuatu:

Distance and flexible learning by the University of the South Pacific has been in existence for nearly forty years - longer than this country has been an independent nation. A substantial number of Vanuatu leaders and important nationals obtained their tertiary education through what initially was called the University Extension Services in those early days. In fact it was the only easily available opportunity for foundation and tertiary education then and many years later it is still the predominant provider of this service in the country.

Over the years Vanuatu as an independent state has matured and more educational infrastructure improvements have emerged as well as the appearance on the scene of other education stakeholders. The likelihood for DFL

facing tough competition on the continuing education and tertiary training market is imminent, given that such entities as the Vanuatu National Training Council (VNTC) and Technical Vocational and Educational Training (TVET) are now setting strict requirements for quality training (J.Nirua & P.Napwatt, pers. Comm., March, 2008), the VNTC is inviting the participation of all education & training providers to comply with the one national set of conditions for trainers and training providers and DFL has been party to such understanding.

The implication consequently for DFL is that in compliance with the expectations of VNTC, it must be seen to satisfy all training and educational requirements as a provider, it also means that it might lose its competitive edge and its leading role in the provision of tertiary education in its member countries. This can be detrimental to its image if it is found to be offering substandard quality training and education.

It must be said for Vanuatu that other options are currently opening up fast – Asian countries such as the Philippines are becoming the focus for many parents and students (both mature & young) now because educational institutions & programmes are cheaper and practically suit the economic and social needs of Vanuatu (S.Ngwele, pers. Comm, 2007). In addition administrative regulations are student-friendly and other logistical measures are placed to meet students' financial needs. Furthermore students who have had contact with DFL are now opting for the Filipino experience because DFL has become stagnant in as far as satisfying their needs for further learning.

Photo 6:



2 of the first 2008 Vanuatu students in the Philippines

Conclusion:

From the perspective of the outer island student the DFL mission statement can be misleading in its promise to offer and deliver educational opportunities suited to their needs. The atmosphere and style of delivery is unsympathetic of student circumstances and may lead to loss of trust and motivation to continue engaging in the activities of distance and flexible learning.

DFL does have issues of logistics, administration and student support but these are not insurmountable; they can be dealt with effectively through closer networking with other education stakeholders, either locally or at national levels. The related issue of qualified personnel is pertinent to the successful and qualitative academic well-being and performance of isolated island students.

In addition decentralization of certain activities could further contribute to lessening the burdens of distance and communication if some autonomy were given to regional campuses and outer island centres which are better informed and cognizant of student circumstances.

Last but not least is the fact that DFL can lose its competitive edge and position as the largest and longest serving provider for distance learning. If it needs to renovate and recreate its image and profile to maintain its position, it must

comply with governmental training boards and their conditions for quality training and provision. Vanuatu DFL is undergoing the process of meeting VNTC expectations and it may be that other USP member countries are doing the same or have complied with their governments' expectation to better strengthen the activities of distance learning.

Reference:

a. Online

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c. Photographs

1. Maoh, A. Photos 1 – 5, March, 2008.
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