An evaluation of a generic course at a university in the Pacific Islands

Loriza Zinnie Rafiq
The University of the South Pacific

Jeremy Dorovolomo
The University of the South Pacific

Abstract

This study aims to evaluate a generic course at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in order to gather perceived strengths and gaps that may need addressing. A qualitative study, the evaluation was conducted via two methods. The first was through the interviews with four teaching staff of the course. The second involved an email feedback from six academics from different departments of the university. The findings of this study indicate that the course is generally perceived to be achieving its objectives, strong in promoting Pacific consciousness and has very clear and attainable learning outcomes and expectations. Moreover, the use of Pacific terms such as the vaka (canoe) and talanoa (conversation), were seen as strengths of the course. The course being delivered via a variety of mediums by an active, passionate and committed group of staff was viewed as a strength. In terms of areas that may need improvement, there were suggestions that the content and its scope, course description, and the marking rubrics could be re-examined. There was also a suggestion that there needs to be a pool of assignment tasks so that repetition semester after semester does not occur, and to reduce the level of plagiarism. In addition, there is a suggestion to have regular meetings among members of the teaching team, to listen to each other. These suggestions have implications for curriculum decisions regarding the course and its possible revision regarding content and focus, its delivery and assessment.

Keywords: Pacific Islands, course evaluation, curriculum alignment, learning outcome, curriculum coherence

Literature review

While assessment is interested in the performance of learners, evaluation refers to the "performance of a course or a curriculum" (Moore, 2018: 51). Moore (2018) states that the evaluation of a course or program should involve six processes. The first is to engage stakeholders, which involves assembling students, staff, deans and others whose perspectives would be valuable to the evaluation of the course.

The second process is to prepare a program description by specifying resources required towards successful implementation of the course or program, such as intellectual, human, financial, organizational, and community resources. The third process is to focus the evaluation process on the priorities of stakeholders. The fourth process is to ensure that stakeholders perceive the data collected in the evaluation as credible. The fifth process entails determining the findings and recommendations being put forward. The final process is to then use and share these recommendations widely and particularly to stakeholders (Moore, 2018). Moreover, Moore (2018) stresses that the main reasons for evaluating a course is to improve the learning experience and to also gauge the performance of the teaching staff.

Holbrook and Chen (2017) evaluated a course in social work at a US university involving forty-four students. They found that the students' feedback revolves around whether or not the course has utility in their practice. This underlines the salience of having courses connect theory and research into students' practice. The need is to have concepts in the course that are relevant to students' contexts. Students' active engagement in real life is critical to having knowledge and theory from the course enacted (Holbrook and Chen, 2017). Furthermore, Aksoydan and Mizikaci (2015) evaluated expectations of stakeholders such as students, dieticians, patients, instructors, cooks and waiters, and managers, on thirty-four nutrition and dietetics programs in Turkey. They found that the majority of stakeholders' expectation is that the programs should be more skills development and practice-oriented. Unsurprisingly, the only stakeholders who felt theory and academic skills writing are important are academics. Most stakeholders advocate for learning by doing and workplace learning. There was also feedback from stakeholders for the development of communication skills, decision making, taking responsibility, problem solving, and teamwork (Aksoydan and Mizikaci, 2015). It is integral that universities do not exist as ivory towers but as institutions that interact with society and the working life. It is necessary therefore to make periodic evaluations of courses and programs at university to stay in touch with needs and changes. Crucially, it should not remain as an evaluation but "courses should be improved and revised in a systematic way to improve student learning as well as hands-on learning" (Aksoydan and Mizikaci, 2015: 181) to action evaluation outcomes.

Denson, Loveday, and Dalton (2010) express the view that course evaluations are done at universities but it is not entirely clear the extent in which instructors incorporate suggestions to improve their teaching. Furthermore, Denson and colleagues are concerned about the evaluation instrument itself that was used in an Australian research-intensive university in that they found a lack of variation in satisfaction levels between courses. This means the instrument used does not distinguish differences between courses. Denson et al. (2010), therefore, recommend increasing the four-point response scale possibly by one, in order to increase the range of choices. They also found that the indicators on the instrument are relevant and focused on student learning than merely on staff performance (Denson et al., 2010). Another caveat is shown when Stewart (2018) collected 286 student evaluations and fifty-five staff members of an US university, and found that the faculty that gives more fail grades is likely to receive lower response rates. In other words, students who received very good grades are more likely to attempt the course evaluations than those who receive poor marks. If they do, students with

lower grades often respond with poor ratings, which can lead to biased and inaccurate reflections of the teaching that occurred in the course.

Culver (2012) evaluated randomly twenty-two online courses at a university in the US and found that it did not gauge the levels of peer interaction and the creation of class community. Culver also found that prompt communication between instructor and students leads to positive perceptions of students on the learning outcomes of the course. Moreover, when the content and course materials have application to real life, it promotes higher student satisfaction. Courses that are viewed as well-organized also receive higher student satisfaction (Culver, 2012). In another study, Borch, Sandvoll, and Risor (2020) investigated students and teachers' perceptions of the evaluation methods used at a Norwegian university and found that the surveys used can often be focused on teaching rather than being learning-oriented. Originally, course evaluations were focused on improving teaching practices, so understandably may have an effect on why universities do not ask about learning processes. Therefore, Borch et al. (2020) suggest course evaluations are not overly focused on satisfaction with teaching but also include other issues that may inhibit student learning. With universities being increasingly more learning outcome-based, it is advised that they reconsider their course evaluation instruments in order to ensure that they are not teaching-focused only.

Morgan (2009) stressed that there is an increasing focus on measuring outputs and outcomes in Australian higher education institutions. Quality audits are conducted on policies and practices, procedures, and objectives of universities. The key performance indicators are student satisfaction, outcomes, and success (Morgan, 2009). Morgan (2009) also emphasized that course evaluations can help improve the quality of teaching as well as the course administration. It serves more purposes than that of simply finding weaknesses. Course evaluations should also uncover aspects of the course that are seen to be done well. Of course, universities have good and bad teachers, and effective and ineffective instructors. However, good educators continually want to improve themselves, their courses, and teaching performance (Morgan, 2009). Morgan (2009) reiterated that the feedback loop is not complete unless the evaluation results are being used to make changes thus "closing the loop" (2009: 9). This study, therefore, intends to investigate the following questions: a) What are the perceived strengths of this generic course to staff members? and b) what suggestions are there to improve the course?

Theoretical Framework

Praslova (2010) stressed that the evaluation of curriculum effectiveness in higher education can help keep stakeholders such as students, parents, governments, accrediting bodies, and businesses informed. The curriculum evaluation process is cyclical, and informs curriculum direction, and when valuable and credible information is available it is important to communicate with these stakeholders before planned changes are made (Praslova, 2010). Leathwood and Phillips (2000) reinforced a view that communication with stakeholders is vital in an environment of accountability, increasing competition, and concerns about falling standards. Ross (2020), in the University of the South Pacific (USP) context, cautioned that this university cannot take its premier status in the South Pacific for

granted when current scandals can potentially damage relations with major donors such as Australia (Ross, 2020), and when other countries have had their own universities such as Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and of course, in Fiji, there is the National University of Fiji and University of Fiji. Since 2018, the incoming Vice Chancellor (VC) Pal Ahluwalia revealed a report that documented allegations of financial mismanagement by the former USP VC Rajesh Chandra and his associates. There were allegations of questionable allowances, bonuses, back pays, and consultancy fees. Pal Ahluwalia has since then been deported and works from Samoa. As a result, Fiji has withheld its contributions to USP worth more than FJ$62 million (Kumar, 2022).

Cierna, Sujova, Habek, Horska, and Kapsdorferova (2017) stressed that ultimately the learning organization puts curriculum and institutional evaluation as pertinent to their roles. In the end, the whole evaluation process is about maximizing student learning in the implemented curriculum and the human potential that they have at their disposal. In addition, it is about building a competitive advantage in a higher education environment that is increasingly crowded (Cierna et al., 2017).
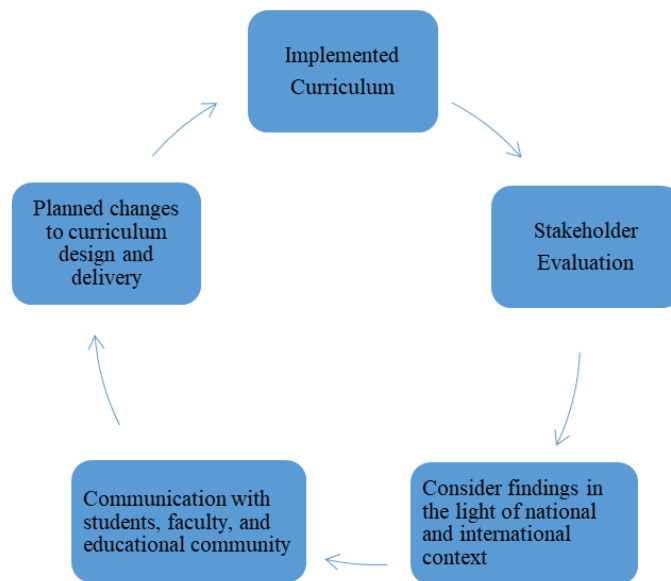

Figure 1. Curriculum evaluation cycle and plan (Harris et al., 2010)

Figure 1 shows that the evaluation of courses and programs in the implemented curriculum is critical in order to re-position courses and their content and pedagogy, and to instigate improvements in learning activities and experiences (Harris et al., 2010). The evaluation of the curriculum should help re-shape the way the needs of a range of stakeholders are accommodated, as well as acknowledging the dynamism of national and international contexts in universities (Harris et al., 2010). Harris et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of evidence-based curriculum decisions in higher education through evaluation. This then allows being responsive to stakeholders and consequently, ensures shared vision in the intended and implemented curriculum.

Satisfying the expectations of stakeholders such as graduates, employers, accrediting authorities, and parents is critical throughout the life cycle of university programs (Harris et al., 2010). Prasad (2020) argues that the USP, as a regional university, is accountable to its twelve-member Pacific Island

countries and also international donors including Australia and New Zealand. Thus, the ongoing allegations about poor governance at USP can be detrimental to both the reputation of this university and regional cooperation (Prasad, 2020). Therefore, at USP it is not only about being responsive to the needs of stakeholders within its members, but also being relevant in the international context and arena. Being responsive to the needs of stakeholders also means gauging what they want. Harris et al. (2010) emphasized that part of the evaluation process is examining national and international contexts, and it is also important to deal with quality assurance against national and international benchmarks (Harris et al., 2010).

Methodology

Morgan (2009) states that there can be various ways of receiving course feedback from students, such as numerical questionnaire scores, open-ended comments, and focus group interviews. Feedback from colleagues can be in the form of peer evaluation, meetings, and tutor course evaluations; and another form of feedback can be taken from self-reflection. This study incorporates feedback from colleagues and peers, four of whom are part of the teaching team of the generic course from which this paper is based. They were interviewed individually via zoom, as Fiji was under lockdown due to COVID-19 during the time of data collection. These staff were interviewed because they have intimate knowledge about the course, being part of the teaching team. Authors recorded and transcribed the interviews. Staff from other departments, different from where the course is housed, were sent an email invitation to comment on the course materials being provided to them. Six staff replied and provided feedback. This study evaluates a generic course titled Pacific Worlds that has to be taken by all students that are enrolled at the USP. It is one of four generic courses at USP. The others are English for Academic Learning, Ethics and Governance, and Communication and Information Literacy. Nine of the participants are Fiji-based except for one who is based at Tonga. USP is co-owned by twelve Pacific Island Countries: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Peer evaluation has its benefits as colleagues would generally have the contextual and content expertise to make judgements on the course (Morgan, 2009). Morgan (2009) added that peers may also be in a better position to evaluate the course design, assessments, and the curriculum development and materials. Students would often do better evaluating the delivery and assessments in the course (Morgan, 2009). In a course that is taught by a team, Morgan (2009: 8) suggests that "feedback can be collected regarding the quality of the course delivery and content and general or specific areas of improvement" from tutors of the course. This paper incorporated Morgan's suggestion to collect feedback from the tutors of the course studied. As mentioned previously, interviewed were four of the ten tutors who support two coordinating lecturers in the course. Since the course is a generic course, evaluation and opinion was also obtained from six staff from other departments. Authors received ethical approval from USP to conduct the study as well as consent from participants.

Data Analysis

This study utilizes thematic analysis (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018) to create meaning, which has the five steps of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting and concluding. Participant quotes used in this section are from both the interviews and answers to the open-ended questionnaires. The first step is compiling, which involves putting data into a usable form by transcribing the interviews, and Castleberry and Nolen (2018) suggest transcribing it yourself, which is what authors did. Authors transcribing the interviews thus enabled a "closeness to the data" (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018: 808). Authors read, reread and conversed about the data face to face, and also via zoom conversations. Step two is disassembling, and pertains to coding similarities and differences, and identifying themes and concepts, and this consequently enables meaningful groups to be obtained from the data. It also involves identifying interesting features, establishing categories, and a clear definition of each of them (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Interesting features we found of the course, for example, would be the use of Pacific terms vaka (canoe/boat) and talanoa (conversation/dialogue) to organize their tutorial groups. The other interesting feature was the use of performances, play and role plays as an assessment piece. Authors listed information that consisted of providing positive comments on the one side and a list of suggestions for improvement on the other. Authors then derived the following categories to put the information into: purpose and outcomes, focus, content, staff, delivery, students, and assessment.

Reassembling is the third step, and entails providing context for the categories created and ensuring that they are related to the research questions(s). It also involves rechecking the robustness, coherence and quality of the categories and themes developed (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). A summary is provided under each category to conclude.

Purpose and Outcome

In terms of the purpose and outcomes of the course positive feedback received were:

> *The overall purposes and outcomes of the course are good encouraging Pacific consciousness and sustainability. (YG)*

> *It appears to be reasonably sufficient in its description, learning outcomes and the alignment with learning activities and assessment. (WG)*

Suggestions for improvement on the purpose and outcomes of the course can be highlighted from these quotes:

> *Rewrite with clear description of the targeted knowledge domain, concepts, theories or paradigms that the course will focus on and how it is important for a Pacific University Graduate. (EN)*

> *Ensure the relationship between Course Learning Outcome and the assessment items is clear. (HR)*

While there is alignment between the course CLO, activities and the assessments, there is also a need to reconsider them, and to have a clearer descriptor of targeted knowledge domains, theories and paradigms underpinning the course.

Focus

In terms of the focus of the course, positive feedback given included:

It has a strong Pacific consciousness focus. The importance of Pacific Islanders knowing more about each other's practices, identity and culture.(TT)

The course is very useful in that it teaches the cultures of the Pacific and Pacific consciousness. (PH)

The notion of the Vaka in grouping students and staff in UU204 is very appropriate, signifying paddling together. (PH)

A participant cautioned on the focus of the course:

Course Curriculum – given that the course is titled "Pacific Worlds" – can there be emphasis on how we know what we know and our own epistemology of knowing even if this is a topic for one of the weeks. To be more 'Pacific conscious' means seeing things from the perspective of a Pacific Islander which is in turn informed by their own epistemological and ontological view of the world and reality. (EN)

The course focuses strongly on Pacific consciousness, culture and terminologies, but there was also caution to ensure that such Pacific consciousness is from the perspective of the Pacific Islander.

Content

The other category is the content of the course. The following presents some positive feedback:

As a generic course it has usefulness for other disciplines such as globalization. (TT)

The content is appropriate and set in a variety of media. (WM)

There is also feedback from a second evaluation of the content of the course:
Staff have raised a few things on the content and that could be looked at. (PH)

Update areas especially taking into account COVID-19 and how it has changed our perspective as Pacific Islanders. (CH)

Student Hours – It appears that the course is quite intensive as it is. What are student's engagement like and if they are coping well with the course coverage is something that needs to be asked. (EN)
Under the CLO of challenges, it would be good to include more sociological and psychological themes such as adverse childhood experiences, gender-based violence, trauma and mental health issues which are all prevalent and need to be critically discussed for the Pacific Island region. (AN)

Participants suggested that there needs to be conversation on the scope of contents, taking into consideration a few contemporary happenings in the Pacific Islands.

Staff

Another category of responses relates to the staff of the course:

> *The teaching staff work as a team. Are very active, passionate, committed and help each other. (PH)*

> *Besides the students, as facilitator you also learn more about yourself as Oceanian as well. (PH)*

> *The teaching team has a "critical" eye of the course which helped to fine tune it. (PH)*

A suggestion was proposed, that for the teaching staff, there is:

> *The need for regular meetings as a teaching team as a venue to listen to everyone and build respect and cooperation. (TT)*

> *Professional development for teaching assistants is important individually and as a group. (WM)*

Participants indicated that the teaching team is passionate and committed to the course and each other. There are those in the team that have a critical eye on the course where regular meetings could be beneficial to take those ideas on board. While you inevitably learn from a job, there is also need for professional development for its staff.

Delivery

The delivery of the course is another category created. It is said that strengths of the course are that:

> *The course is being delivered in multiple ways from face to face, to blended, online, flexi-school, and offline print mode. Good coverage and reach. (WM)*

> *The use of Pacific tools such as the vaka, talanoa and va are good. (YM).*

There were suggestions for the delivery of the course such as:

> *To bring in regional visits again, where it is viable, after the pandemic helps the "presence" of the course to regional students. (TT)*

> *We can always invite speakers from outside the course to speak to our students. (WM).*

> *The teaching team including the Coordinators need to be accessible by students. The consultation hours are not visible for students to utilize. (WG)*

> *It would be a good idea to also have prescribed text/s and other teaching resources listed on the outline to assist students with extra readings. (WG)*

Being delivered in multiple modes was seen as a major strength of the course. However, there is the suggestion for greater visibility in the region, and for more accessibility of staff to students. In addition, there is advice given, to have invited speakers for the course. There is also a suggestion for prescribed textbooks.

Students

A category of the study relates to students, and that:

> *The course helps students to reflect on the realities of their countries such as the impacts of logging and tourism. (TT)*

The reflective activities in the course helps students examine their feelings and thoughts and that makes it liberating. (WM)

However, concerning students:

There are students who do not familiarize themselves with the information on Moodle. (WM)

Technology and the internet can be a problem for many students doing the course. (WM)

The students need be reminded to take ownership of their learning and, at the same time direct students where to go to if there are issues concerning disabilities or other issues in learning. (WG)

The course enables students to reflect on the realities of the Pacific Islands, but it was also noted that students need to be familiar with Moodle and take ownership of their own learning. It is also noted that the course should specify how students with disabilities will be catered for. There is also recognition that there are students who have difficulties with internet access and technology.

Assessment

The final category is on assessment, and there are a number of suggestions made that:

Some marking rubrics will need the team to review. (PH)

There needs to be a pool of assignment questions to avoid students plagiarizing. Having questions repeated "adding fuel to the fire". (TT)

The matai activity that is creative and practical should be encouraged at a larger scale than at the moment. Student experiences need to be meaningful. (TT)

The piece of assignment that is due on week three can be moved to week five as the university is still enrolling students up to week three. (WM).

Ensure the course is also part of the academic skills training – so assessments include academic essay writing, literature review, library database searching and/or reading research, and not just self-reflections and personal writing. (AN)

Ask students to do critical thinking and discussions from their own perspective as Pacific people but also using evidence and published readings to develop and back up their opinions. (AN)

Suggesting to do away with Quiz (something more relevant for abstract courses like Mathematics, and Economics), instead of having Quizzes this should be replaced with having both CRWP (Critical Reflective Writing Paper) as one of the assignments with the Matai project as final assignment. (EN)

Under each video assessment, you have a compulsory reading. You might want to consider using Perusal to facilitate that reading allocated with mark, in order that they read it. (KR)

Can have a look at all the assessments. (YM)

There is extensive feedback to have another look at certain aspects of the manner in which the course is being assessed. From the order of due dates, the marking rubrics and the types of assessments employed in the course.

The fourth step in Castleberry and Nolen's (2018) data analysis is interpreting, where the data and categories are represented in a thematic map, in order to visually represent relationships and connections between constructs.
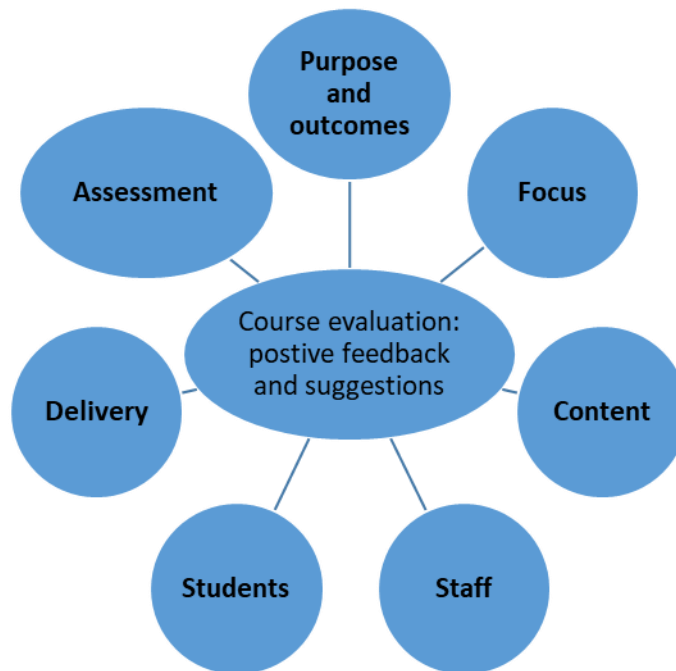

Figure 2. Categories from the data analysis

The fifth and final step is concluding (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) where one would attempt to respond to the research question (s) and the purpose of the study. The relevance and applicability of findings can also be covered (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Authors sought to evaluate a generic course at the University of the South Pacific from the perspective of staff who are in the teaching team and from other sections of the institution. The findings have implications for the improvement of the course or as a basis for conversations about the course among those teaching it.

Discussion

This study found that while there are participants who commend the alignment between the course learning outcomes (CLO), activities and the assessments, there are also suggestions to reconsider them, and to have a clearer descriptor of targeted knowledge domains, theories and paradigms underpinning the course. Lau, Lam, Kam, Nkhoma, and Richardson (2018), in their study of two undergraduate programs at an Australian university, showed the importance of clear learning outcome statements and assessments in order to capture the relevant knowledge in the programs. This may appear straightforward, but the gaps between learning outcomes and the assessments could be major sources of misalignment in university courses (Lau et al., 2018). What is needed could be a relatively simple compilation of an "alignment matrix" (Cowan et al., 2004: 445) which would have the learning outcomes on the one column, learning and teaching activity on the second, and assessment on the third column. If the course team can go through its alignment exercise from the outcomes to the activities in place, and assessment, they will be bound to find discrepancies and omissions (Cowan et

al., 2004). Cowan et al. (2004) added that this exercise enables the course team to be critical friends of each other and that it encourages professionalism and systematic design of its course.

Hatzakis, Lycett, and Serrano (2007) referred to the salience of "curriculum coherence" (2007: 643) which could be misaligned if course contents and aims, outcomes and assessments, are poorly coherent. Hatzakis et al. (2007: 644) also made a point that while there is top-down, vertical alignment of outcomes, activities and assessment, there is often neglect of the "lateral misalignment" of modules within the course itself. Furthermore, a very well planned curriculum does not necessarily translate into quality student experience, which makes semester to semester evaluations critical to ongoing improvements in course offerings (Hatzakis et al., 2007). This is what happens to the discipline area the authors are a part of. There were many curriculum alignment workshops, and other activities carried out. However, they were mostly vertical alignment exercises for each course, and did not devote sufficient time to the lateral coherence and alignment of the programs. Even though the course in this study is a generic course of the university, and thus may be seen as a stand-alone course, it should also be critiqued for its vertical and lateral coherence. Another finding of this study is that participants suggested that there needs to be a conversation about the scope of contents, taking into consideration a few contemporary events in the Pacific Islands such as the pandemic, gender-based violence, and mental health. Hatzakis et al. (2007) do support the need to ensure lateral coherence across the same course, besides horizontal alignment within the overall program, suggesting that "coherence is the outcome of the ongoing participation and involvement of different stakeholders" (Hatzakis et al.: 646). In the case of this study, university academics are the stakeholders consulted and the suggestion to have a look at the contents is valid as too often vertical scrutiny is performed, that ensured alignment between learning outcomes, content, and assessment. However, the lateral coherence (Hatzakis et al., 2007) of contents of the course can be neglected.

This study also found that the course focuses strongly on Pacific consciousness, culture and terminologies, but also there was caution to ensure that such Pacific consciousness is from the perspective of the Pacific Islander. Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens (2021), who reflected on UU204 Pacific Worlds, the course this study evaluated, highlighted the importance of tapping the lived experiences of the students as Pacific Islanders. With shared learning experiences, it is central to reclaim Pacific perspectives in teaching and learning. This notion of a shared journey is depicted in the course in the canoe metaphor. There is the challenge, however, that not all of Pacific Islands can necessarily relate to the Ocean and the canoe metaphor. Many Pacific Islanders live inland such as in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, for instance (Rafai et al., 2021). Rafai et al. (2021) emphasized that various terms such as cooperative learning are not new terminologies, but are already in existence in Pacific communities. Moreover, in UU204 they incorporate Pacific song, dance, poetry, painting, sketching and drama into their teaching. Previously performed face to face, students can also have them on YouTube. Groups within UU204 are called vaka groups and the course attempts to connect students and their experiences from different countries of the Pacific Islands (Rafai et al., 2021).

Rafai et al. (2021) also acknowledged that there are students who are unengaged in the course, and this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Another finding of this study was that it was

perceived that the course enables students to reflect on the realities of the Pacific Islands, but it was also noted that students need to be familiar with Moodle, and sections of the course need to take ownership of their own learning. There is also recognition that there are students who have difficulties with internet access and technology. Rafai et al. (2021) underlined the need to get students to critique themselves as Pacific Islanders. Students could perceive themselves in diverse ways depending on their ethnicity, period of arrival in the islands, family background and race. It is vital also to instructors of UU204 to help students decolonize their thinking around themselves, the curriculum, teaching and learning (Rafai et al., 2021). Moreover, Nabobo and Teasdale (1994) state that "education must ensure that the Pacific way of life is preserved and affirmed, just as any other group in the world requires recognition of its unique identity. Unless people understand and appreciate their own culture, how can they truly understand another?" (1994: 5). There needs to be cultural literacy incorporated into the curriculum. Education and culture are intertwined, which requires the affirmation of the cultures of children who are in your classroom (Nabobo and Teasdale, 1994). Nabobo and Teasdale (1994), however, asserted that there needs to be balance between traditional and Western education. It would be catastrophic if the beauty of diverse cultures, traditions, music, art and histories are not reflected in the national curricula (Nabobo and Teasdale, 1994).

Auxier (2003) argued that "the cultural force situated across the gap from students' home cultures includes a complex combination of globalization, internalized colonization, and students' transition into higher education. Each South Pacific higher education student potentially experiences the simultaneous, opposing pull of these forces" (2003: 20). Globalization in itself can be a force that neglects and dilutes local cultures. Even years after independence, Pacific Island countries have national curricula that are still highly influenced by former colonial, and neo-colonial powers. Colonization has been internalized and so are the minds which require undoing. There is the rhetoric of decolonizing the curriculum and this should be carried out as a dynamic process that involves the country, group or an individual. Auxier (2003) underlined that often culture is seen as a group phenomenon; but the individual is a member of that group and not necessarily a clone of the group. Everyone's personal culture is different and their lived experiences will not be identical to the other. Each individual has "mobile cultural entities" (Auxier, 2003: 21) which has them profess unique personal cultural characteristics with them. When the individual comes into contact with another person, there are inevitably attempts to bridge the gap that exists between them (Auxier, 2003). These cultural specifics and inter-cultural dynamics are also what students bring to the classroom. Students bring values, beliefs, and their language, and it is important that teachers construct an environment that respects their cultures.

Participants in this study suggest that the course specifies how students with disabilities and various diversities will be catered for. In their study of Australian universities, auditing publicly available policies and procedures, Hitch, Macfarlane, and Nihill (2015) found that just more than a third of Australian universities actually refer to inclusive teaching in their policies and procedures. While there has been a lot more inclusive teaching in Australian universities, it is not reflected in their policies and procedures. It is salient to see inclusive teaching not merely as the inclusion of those with disability, but other differences and diversities that exist at universities. It needs to be viewed as an integral

foundation for quality teaching (Hitch et al., 2015). Numan, George, and McCausland (2000) stressed that in their bid to develop its human capital for their economic development, nations are making higher education more accessible to the masses, rather than being overly elitist. With this, comes a greater diversity of students from different backgrounds including cultural and religious diversity, and differences in social class, as well as from diverse age and gender groups, interests, experiences, and capacity. This poses challenges for universities to have instructors who will operate effectively in contexts of diversity (Nunan et al., 2000). Nunan et al. (2000) pointed out that it is about anticipating and accommodating students' diverse needs through teaching, resourcing, student grouping, and facilities. That students have effective access to resources such as textbooks, libraries, internet services, and student learning support.

This study found that participants indicated that the teaching team were passionate and committed to the course and to each other. There are those in the team that have a critical eye on the course where regular meetings could be beneficial to take those ideas on board. While you inevitably learn from a job, there is also the suggestion for professional development for its staff. Besides curriculum alignment between outcomes, learning and teaching, and assessment, Cowan, George, and Pinheiro-Torres (2004) suggested that change management at universities should integrate the elements of staff, curriculum and institutional development. In other words, at the micro-level, there should be alignment between outcomes, learning and assessment but also at macro-level staff, curriculum, and institutional development should occur hand in hand (Cowan et al., 2004). Cowan et al. (2004) argued that at university, curriculum development that is linked to staff development is crucial to overall institutional development. Hatzakis et al. (2007) encourage formalization of conversations around curriculum coherence, and having these discussions recorded for future action and reference. Kruse (2001) emphasized the importance of teachers building a professional community, with the mutual focus on improved student learning. This professional community could include teachers setting time to discuss lessons, units or the whole course together. Kruse (2001: 362) stressed that "collective, regular processes of teachers and administrators working together around issues of practice and professional knowledge will provide schools with the capacity for change and development". Careful use of data on the course, students and staff in the decision making processes can help improve instruction and student learning (Kruse, 2001). Furthermore, Kruse (2001) reiterated the salience of social exchange and interaction in the professional community in order to foster understanding of key activities in one's program. In other words, members of the professional community need to talk and reflect together in a regular basis.

Another finding of the study pertains to the delivery of the course, and that while having it offered via multiple modes was seen as a strength, due to the COVID-19 and the financial restrictions the university has, there was a suggestion to bring back visits to regional campuses which plays a role in increasing the visibility of the course and university. Another important suggestion was to have a prescribed textbook and also see the possibilities of having invited speakers to help deliver certain cultural aspects of the course. Having courses and programs delivered through different learning styles that cater for visual, aural, read/write or kinesthetic in a multimodal fashion is vital. Concepts presented in an array of ways can increase students' learning (Sankey, Birch, and Gardiner, 2011).

Sankey et al. (2011) purport stimulating more than one sensory mode in order that complex information could be comprehended more easily. With universities increasing their investment into online learning and teaching, staff would also need to be conversant with new tool functionality and a new way of working. Macdonald and Poniatowska (2011) emphasized that the context of staff development should be taken on board that while there are university staff who embrace new online tools, there are also those who find new virtual tools bewildering and intimidating. Therefore, staff need to be encouraged to take professional development in online technologies, as in today's university environment being proficient in online methods and resources should be a job requirement (Macdonald and Poniatowska, 2011), including assessment in that environment. The final finding of this study is that there was a suggestion to review certain aspects of the manner in which the course is being assessed. From the order of due dates, the marking rubrics and to the types of assessments employed in the course. Guetterman and Mitchell (2016) argue for the importance of university lecturers learning from each other in assessment tasks. These could include how they dealt with certain issues, how they structured their assessments, what practical ideas they could learn from, and what array of solutions could they take on in their assessments. Eventually, it is crucial that an "institutional culture of assessment" (Guetterman and Mitchell, 2016: 55) needs to be encouraged at university. There needs to be a milieu in which assessment and the processes are valued, not merely for accreditation, but where shared experiences in assessment are experienced among faculty members (Guetterman and Mitchell, 2016).

Conclusion

Realistically, a course at university should not be static. Gaps and strengths should be gauged regularly, from a simple change of a graphic, to something updated to an overall redesign, revisions are necessary. Even a superbly designed course needs evaluation and revisions. In this paper we identified areas of strength and suggestions for improvement in the purposes and outcomes of the generic course, including the focus, content, staff, students, the delivery and its assessment. These factors are intertwined, and the weaknesses or gaps, in particular, are not meant to be judgmental, but rather, to encourage enhanced student learning and development. Learning should be not simply aimed at obtaining a grade at the end of the semester, but a process that authentically influences Pacific consciousness and identity, a graduate attribute of the University of the South Pacific. Since the response rates of the university end-of-semester course evaluation are extremely low, such undertakings are pertinent. The purpose of this evaluation is for both students and educators. The lead author is part of the teaching team of UU204 Pacific Worlds and this can provide points for conversation among members of the group. Developing a professional community which respects evaluation and feedback can ultimately have efficacy to improved student learning.

References

Doucet, Andrea and Natasha S. Mauthner. 2008. "What can be known and how? Narrated subjects and the listening guide." *Qualitative Research*, 8 no. 3: 399–409 (July), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1468794106093636.

Durrant, Jacqui. 2010. "Odes of a Restless Spirit: John Pule." Art Asia Pacific. Accessed Jan 2021.

http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/67/OdesOfARestlessSpiritJohnPule.

Heard, E., Fitzgerald, L., Va'ai, S., Collins, F., and Mutch, A. 2019. "Suiga/Change: An Ethnodrama Exploring Challenges in Intimate Relationships With Young People in Samoa." *Violence Against Women*, 25 no. 3: 297–312 (July), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1077801218778388.

Kauli, Jackie and Verena Thomas. 2019. "Media Practice and Theatre in Conversation : Co- Creating Narratives for Positive Social Change." *ArtsPraxis*, 5 *no*. 2: 225–242, https://eprints.qut.edu.au/128183/.

Pule, John. 1992. *The Shark that Ate the Sun: Ko e Māgo ne Kai e Lā*. Auckland: Penguin Books.

Pule, John and Nicholas Thomas. 2005. *Hiapo: Past and Present in Niuean Barkcloth*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press.

Rhodes, Carl and Andrew D. Brown. 2005. "Writing responsibly: Narrative fiction and organization studies." *Organization*, 12 no. 4: 467–491, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1350508405052757.

Suaalii-Sauni, Tamasailau and Saunimaa Ma Fulu-Aiolupotea. 2014. "Decolonising Pacific research, building Pacific research communities and developing Pacific research tools: The case of the talanoa and the faafaletui in Samoa." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 55 no. 3: 331–344 (December), https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/apv.12061.

Thomas, Erin. 2017. "Assessing Gender-based Violence in Niue." International Center for Advocates Against Discrimination. Accessed Oct 2022. https://icaad.ngo/2017/11/22/assessing-gender-based-violence-niue/.

Thomas, Erin. 2020. Gender-based Violence in Niue: Challenges and Opportunities in Small Pacific Islands. Master's thesis, University of Auckland.

Thomas, E., Tukiuha, C., Underhill-Sem, Y., and Jama'l Talagi. 2021. "Family-tree Mapping and Gender-based Violence (GBV) in Niue: Research Method and Intervention." *Pacific Health Dialog*, 21 no. 7: 380-389 (June), http://pacifichealthdialog.nz/index.php/phd/article/view/99.

Vaioleti, Timote M. 2006. "Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research." *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12: 21–34, https://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/handle/10289/6199.

Wickliffe, Cora-Allan. 2020. "About Cora-Allan Wickliffe." Accessed January 2021. http://www.cora-allan.co.nz/about.html.

Woodward-Hanna, Rebekah. 2014. "A Patchwork of Participation: Wan Smolbag Theatre's 'Big Plays' in Vanuatu." *Australasian Drama Studies*, 64: 223–242 (April), https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/INFORMIT.257536112365447.

Authors' biographies

Ms Loriza Zinnie Rafiq is a Teaching Assistant at the Pacific Studies, the University of the South Pacific (USP) based at the Laucala campus, Fiji. Before joining USP in 2019, she had vast experience teaching at Fiji primary schools for nineteen years up to being Head Teacher.

Dr Jeremy Dorovolomo is a senior lecturer in education at the University of the South Pacific (USP) based at the Laucala Campus, Fiji. He taught in Solomon Islands high schools from 1989 to 1999 and joined the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education in 2000 to 2003. He has been with USP since 2004 to date.