

From Dual-Mode to Multimodal, Flexible Teaching and Learning: Distance Education at the University of the South Pacific

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Introduction

The world economy is already dominated by knowledge-based activities, and all future forecasts speak of the world becoming more knowledge-intensive even more rapidly than in the past. The World Bank has been actively promoting the shift in the development paradigm towards recognizing that the creation, storage, analysis, dissemination, and effective utilization of knowledge provide the new foundation for development. In the *World Development Report* for 1988/99, for instance, the World Bank proposes that “we look at the problems of development in a new way – from the perspective of knowledge” (World Bank, 1999, 1).

This new world order is placing a premium on education, especially on higher education, as we can see from the following quotation from the Report of the UNESCO International Commission on Education for the 21st Century:

Higher education is at one and the same time one of the driving forces of economic development and the focal point of learning in a society . . . In a world where resources of knowledge will increasingly predominate over material resources as factors in production, the importance of higher education and of higher education institutions can only grow (Delors et al., 1996, 130).

Distance education has a vital role to play in meeting the growing demand for higher education. The most recent authoritative

document on higher education in developing countries produced by the World Bank and UNESCO Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000) maintains, for instance, that

Distance learning is an increasingly important part of the higher education system, with its ability to reach students in remote areas and address the higher education needs of adults . . . The Task Force believes that distance education offers many exciting possibilities (p. 49).

The dramatic improvements in information and communications technologies, the inability of traditional universities and modes of delivery to meet growing demand, the urgency of increased access to higher education, especially in developing countries, economies of scale offered by distance education, and the flexibility offered by distance education for learners needing lifelong learning have given distance education a special, and sometimes a preferred, place in meeting the higher education needs of developing societies.

The University of the South Pacific (USP), a regional university founded in 1968 to provide education to eleven countries, colonies and territories (now twelve countries), started distance education in 1971¹ (Renwick, King and Shale, 1991, 7) with a minor role in its total operations. Given its geographical isolation and dispersal in about 33 million km² of the Pacific Ocean, distance education was very appropriate and urgently needed. However, distance education continued to receive inadequate attention until recently.

Technological developments, proactive leadership from the management of the university, external reviews of distance learning, and pressure and friendly advice from the University Grants Committee (UGC) have led to a major re-prioritization of distance education. Indeed, the whole university is now being transformed into a flexible multimodal institution, assisted greatly by the recently launched telecommunications umbrella of the university, called USPNet 2000.

This paper is a case study of the development of distance education at USP, one of the world's only two regional universities, and the process of transforming the university from its dual mode operation with inadequate attention to distance learning to a multimodal flexible teaching and learning institution.

This paper:

Outlines briefly the context of these changes by referring to the operating environment of the USP;

Traces the development of distance education from its beginning in 1971 – only three years after the inception of the university itself;

Describes the lack of integration of distance education with the rest of the USP's operations;

Identifies and discusses the demands put on the USP for the improvement of distance education from various sources;

Discusses USPNet 2000, the state-of-the-art telecommunications system that is now at the heart of the process of transformation of learning and teaching at the USP;

Alludes to the recent, as yet unpublished, report on the review of distance and flexible learning at USP;

Describes how the recent political crisis in Fiji has speeded up the previously planned evolution into multimodal, flexible learning and teaching;

Identifies possible lessons from the USP experience for wider applicability.

This case study should be of interest to the Caribbean as there are many similarities between the University of the West Indies (UWI) and USP, both in their regional contexts and their operations.

The University of the South Pacific: The Context

Like the UWI, the USP is a regional university serving twelve small island countries in the Pacific,² spread over an ocean area of 33 million km². Established in 1968, it now comprises three campuses – the main campus in Suva, Fiji and specialized campuses in Vanuatu (for law) and Samoa (for agriculture). In addition, it has University Centres³ in all twelve member countries, with sub-Centres in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu.

Ana Stahmer dealt at length with the characteristics of small island countries in her keynote presentation. The USP region contains some of the world's smallest and most isolated countries. The university contributes to human resource development in the broad areas of social sciences, business, humanities, sciences and technology, agriculture, and law. Its programmes range from pre-degree studies to PhD.

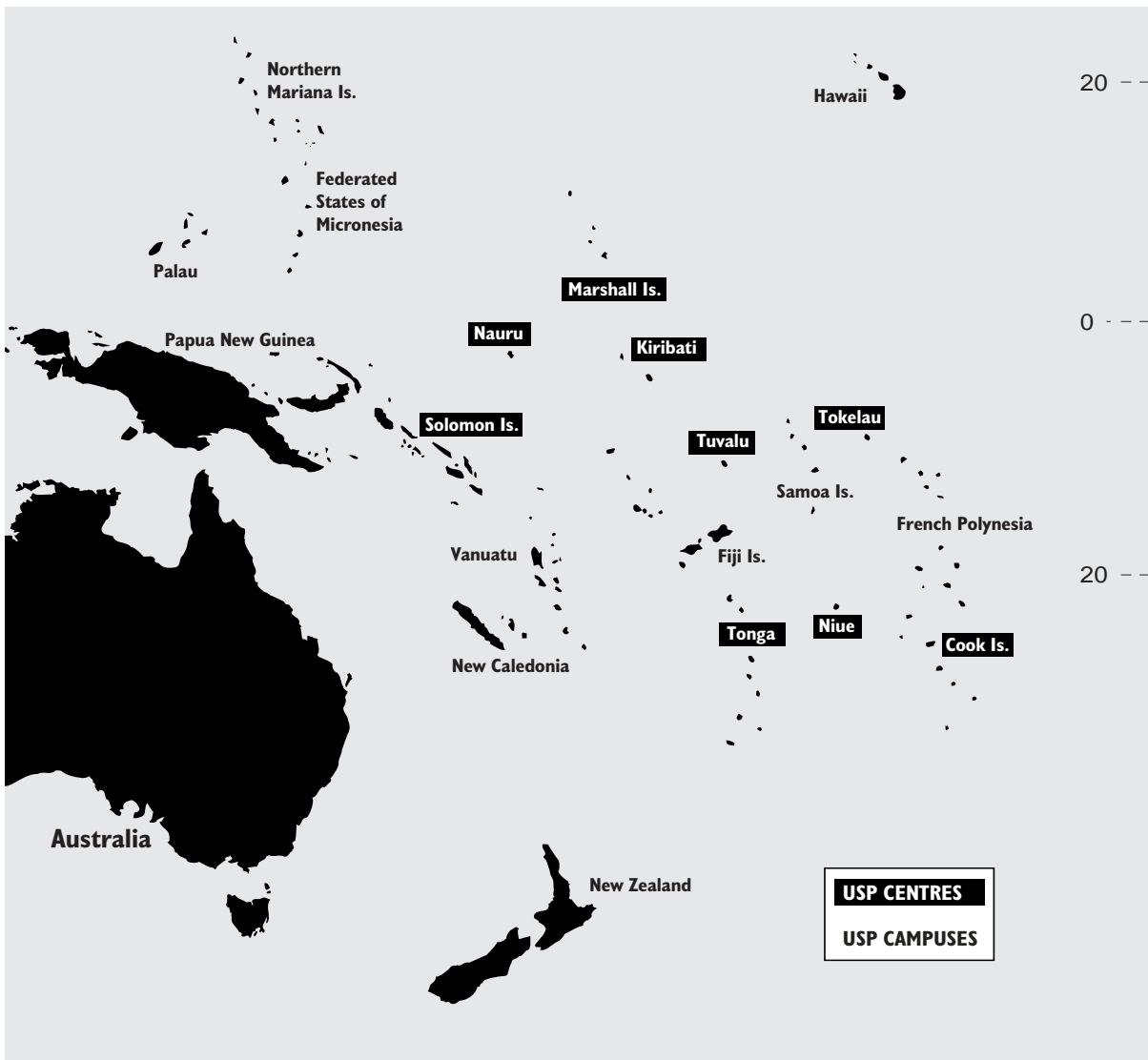
The USP is now a medium sized university, with about 11500 students in 2000,⁴ of whom about 5,200 are distance students. In recent years, the university has been trying to become more effective and efficient, more focused in its

operations, to promote quality, and to increase access for in-country studies.

Unfortunately, the political crisis in Fiji, starting with an armed takeover of the government by a small band of rebels on 19 May 2000, is having a major impact on the country and the USP. The crisis will arrest the progress that was being made in the implementation of the Strategic Plan. It could also set the university back a number of years and seriously threaten the very foundations of the regional university.⁵

Establishment of Distance Education and Structure

The founders of the USP had projected a very applied role for it – they wanted the university to be an agent of development; to meet the manpower needs of the newly emerging countries; to provide assistance to governments in their planning and implementation of development programmes; and to research and publish. Its programmes were to cover both degree and pre-degree studies, given that many countries did not have the capacity to provide



grade 11 and 12 education (referred to as form six and seven studies, or foundation studies for grade 12).

Its founders wanted the university to provide distance education to improve opportunities for many students who would not be able to come to the campuses. The Morris Report, which investigated the need for higher education in the South Pacific and recommended the establishment of the University of the South Pacific in 1966, paid early attention to extra-mural studies, arguing that the university “should have an Extra-mural Department to enable it to carry university studies to towns and villages through the Region, and to promote understanding of and affection for the University in the people of distant areas.”

The Morris Report went on to say:

It will not be forgotten that university extension work of this kind can play, and should play, an extremely important part in the political and social education of the people at large, and especially of those thoughtful and active members of the public, all over the countries of the Region, who do so much to form opinion. It is hardly possible to think of any possible beneficial influence which could be more important in assisting the healthy development of democratic and responsible government, both national and local (Morris et al., 1966, 48).

This quotation takes on extra significance in the light of the recent political crisis in Fiji and Solomon Islands – and of significant and persistent problems of governance in most Pacific island countries.

Mr. John Collins took up his position as the first Reader in Extra-mural Studies in the School of Education in January 1970, and the first courses were offered to 154 off-campus students in 1971 (Renwick, King and Shale, 1991, 7). Extension

services became an autonomous component of the university in 1973.

The beginning of distance education was based on the idea of distance courses being developed at the main campus and serviced through the Centres – which had begun to be established from 1971 onwards as resources permitted (Table 1).

The functions of the Centres had been defined at this early stage in the following terms:

Centres were to be established in each country to organise extension and in-service courses in association with the community and local government departments ... They would identify and meet educational and training needs in the community not provided for by other organisations ... They would be administrative centres for national and regional projects mounted by the University (Renwick, King and Shale, 1991, 8).

Table 1 • The establishment of Extension Centres at the University of the South Pacific, 1971–1999

Country	Date of establishment
Solomon Islands	1971
Kiribati	1971
Tonga	1971
Cook Islands	1975
Samoa	1976
Fiji	1976
Niue	1977
Vanuatu	1980
Tuvalu	1980
Nauru	1986
Republic of the Marshall Islands	1993
Tokelau	1999

Source: Internal documents, University of the South Pacific.

The approach chosen was for a separate unit to operate distance and continuing education, but

with academic functions that would be controlled by the teaching schools/departments. This has remained the arrangement to this day. The director of Extension Studies then (now director of University Extension) was to direct the organization of distance education and the running of the Extension Centres. Centres were led by directors of varying academic seniority. The pro vice-chancellor (Academic) was in overall charge of distance education in the Vice-Chancellor's Office - now entrusted to the deputy vice-chancellor.

Limited Capacity, Lack of Integration and Ad Hoc Growth

Distance education grew rapidly, as can be seen in Table 2. Starting with only 154 students in 1971, in the second year of operation, despite rudimentary infrastructure, extension enrolment grew by 47 percent, making up about 19 percent of the total enrolment. It grew extremely rapidly until 1981, reaching 1443 and becoming 42 percent of the total enrolment. It grew at a much more manageable rate of growth to the end of the decade. Growth slowed in the 1990s after another significant increase of 51 percent in 1981 as a result of the university's efforts to manage enrolment to safeguard quality. This year, distance education has recorded a growth of almost 13 percent in comparison with on-campus enrolment, which declined marginally (Table 2) as a result of a new enrolment management system introduced to comply with the guidelines on total enrolments laid down by the UGC - and comprises 46 percent of total enrolment.

The early rapid growth of distance education was based on the fact that distance education was being delivered within the member countries, making it more accessible and cheaper; it was more flexible in that it met the needs of people in the workforce who did not want to leave their

jobs or their countries; and it was cheap in that the "fees" paid by distance students were only a fraction of the fees paid by on-campus students - which themselves were a fraction of the total cost of their education.⁶

Growth also occurred because distance education followed an open learning philosophy, although entry was still tight. However, mature age students could try distance courses that they might not have had the opportunity to do in face-to-face courses, and if they succeeded, they were able to transfer to the campuses.

In terms of resources, distance education could not compete with the campus-based schools until the recent strong focus on distance education. It would be fair to say that distance education found it difficult to secure the degree of funding that would have allowed it to expand as well as to improve its quality. The Commonwealth of Learning Report (COL Report), for instance, argued that

During the last twenty years, the University has developed its own internal procedures for the allocation of resources and the management of its various functions. But we have concluded that these are no longer equal to the claims that distance education students can properly make on the University's total quantum of resources (Renwick, King and Shale, 1991, 96).

During the early period, right until the early 1990s, distance education was seen as an adjunct to face-to-face teaching, and was seen by staff members as a lower priority activity. It was common, for instance, for heads of department to defend delays in the turnaround of assignments by indicating that staff had onerous on-campus commitments, clearly implying that they did extension work over and above their "normal workload", and face-to-face students received priority attention.

**Table 2 • The Growth and Share of Distance Education
at the University of the South Pacific, 1968–2000**

Year	External	Rate of change	Internal	Rate of change	Total	Rate of change	Percent external
2000	4204	12.7	4914	-2.6	9118	3.9	46.1
1999	3729	-27.1	5044	14.7	8773	-7.8	42.5
1998	5117	-1.5	4398	9.6	9515	3.3	53.8
1997	5194	-4.4	4014	1.7	9208	-1.8	56.4
1996	5434	0.3	3947	17.6	9381	6.9	57.9
1995	5419	14.1	3357	14.8	8776	14.4	61.7
1994	4748	3.4	2925	19.4	7673	9.0	61.9
1993	4590	12.1	2449	6.0	7039	9.9	65.2
1992	4094	-8.1	2310	-13.9	6404	-10.3	63.9
1991	4455	-3.2	2684	-0.2	7139	-2.1	62.4
1990	4603	-1.5	2689	12.7	7292	3.3	63.1
1989	4673	51.0	2386	11.9	7059	35.0	66.2
1988	3095	1.0	2133	-9.0	5228	-3.3	59.2
1987	3064	15.9	2344	6.5	5408	11.6	56.7
1986	2643	8.1	2201	17.6	4844	12.2	54.6
1985	2444	11.2	1872	-6.5	4316	2.8	56.6
1984	2197	21.4	2002	-9.8	4199	4.2	52.3
1983	1809	6.1	2219	-3.5	4028	0.6	44.9
1982	1705	18.2	2299	14.8	4004	16.2	42.6
1981	1443	60.9	2003	10.4	3446	27.1	41.9
1980	897	49.3	1814	2.8	2711	14.6	33.1
1979	601	23.7	1765	9.2	2366	12.5	25.4
1978	486	28.6	1617	2.7	2103	7.7	23.1
1977	378	30.3	1574	10.9	1952	14.2	19.4
1976	290	0.3	1419	15.5	1709	12.6	17.0
1975	289	7.0	1229	8.3	1518	8.0	19.0
1974	270	-12.9	1135	9.3	1405	4.2	19.2
1973	310	36.6	1038	24.3	1348	26.9	23.0
1972	227	47.4	835	24.4	1062	28.7	21.4
1971	154		671	55.0	825	90.5	18.7
1970	-		433	68.5	433	68.5	
1969	-		257	66.9	257	66.9	
1968	-		154		154		

Source: Planning and Development Office, unpublished table. Rates of change calculated by the author.

Note: Students from self-funding programmes like the MBA and the Professional Diploma in Legal Practice have been excluded from 1998, while predegree students have been excluded from 1999, as they are also self-funding.

Demands for Greater Priority for Distance Education

Given a combination of factors, such as the COL Report, growing interest in distance education by the University Grants Committee (UGC), stronger leadership of the Distance Education Committee, and stronger advocacy of distance education by the management, there has been a renewed emphasis on flexible, multimodal teaching and learning at the USP. The next section elaborates on these issues. It must also be noted that the interaction of these factors was complemented by harnessing the power of modern communications and information technologies in order to maximize the delivery of distance education to the USP member countries. As one who was intimately involved in the revamping and revitalization of distance education at the USP, I wish to share some of my experiences.

The Commonwealth of Learning Review (COL Report; Renwick et al., 1991)

In 1990, one of the former vice-chancellors of the USP, Dr. James Maraj, who was the president of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and the then vice-chancellor, Mr. Geoffrey Caston, arranged for a comprehensive review of distance learning. The report was published in 1991 (Renwick, King and Shale, 1991). Led by Mr. William Renwick, former director-general of Education in New Zealand, and including Dr. St. Claire from the UWI, the review team made a comprehensive analysis of the distance education programme and offered a number of far-reaching recommendations. The university adopted most of the recommendations, although it is not easy to say that it succeeded in successfully implementing all them.

Two important changes took place as a result of the Renwick Report. First, the review pointed to the very unsatisfactory telecommunications system. While praising the system for what it had

managed to achieve, the Report pointed out how inadequate it was, and explained why it was important for the university to invest in a more modern and sustainable telecommunications system. This was considered a prerequisite to taking full advantage of advances in communications and information technologies. Only recently, the leaders of the G8 countries that met in Tokyo reiterated the need for greater exploitation of information technology to solve the problem of the widening knowledge gap faced by developing countries.

The COL Report recommended that the University of the South Pacific urgently look at different options for its telecommunications system that would meet four requirements:

- link its teaching campuses and all centres in an integrated system for the management of distance education operations;
- provide teleconferencing facilities that can be used by tutors and students in all countries of the University region;
- provide, in cooperation with island governments and national carriers, phone-in facilities for students living at a distance from university centres; and
- be capable of networking with the communications systems that are being developed by the Commonwealth of Learning to facilitate cooperation among distance education institutions of the Commonwealth (Renwick, King and Shale, 1991, 94).

Immediately after this Report, the university established the Telecommunications Policy Group that I had the privilege of chairing in its formative years. It is this group that made the decision as early as 1992 to pursue an independently owned and operated system to replace the then inadequate system. The second major change that occurred was the reorganization of the administrative and management structure for

distance learning, with the establishment of the apex Distance Education Committee, and the rationalization of the different components of distance teaching and learning.

At the same time, the senior management also began to signal a greater determination to improve distance learning – and to ensure that staff members gave greater attention to distance students. One example of this change is that when I took over the chairmanship of the Academic Committee in 1990 only about half of the extension courses had their results ready in time for approval by the Committee; when I left it three years later, almost 100 percent of the courses had their results ready – mostly the result of a clear statement of the importance of preparing results on time, and a willingness on my part to write to staff that if they did not perform, it would be taken into account during the review of staff for contract renewals and promotions.

The UGC's Emphasis on Distance Learning

Pressure also came from the UGC, which was not satisfied that the USP was giving fair attention to distance students. The practice of the UGC to meet every year, rather than every three years, and their decision to visit all Extension Centres, has meant additional pressure to improve distance education.

In the UGC report for the previous triennium (1997–1999), there was a clear indication of the wish of the UGC for the university to make a bold attempt to transform itself into a flexible, multimodal learning institution. The UGC Report for 1997–1999 had a chapter entitled “Re-inventing the University”, in which it argued that:

The USP now needs to evolve into a multi-modal, multi-point access university, served by the most modern and flexible arrangements for administration and decision-making. It should

actively pursue changes which will help it realise its distinctive brief to ensure the availability and quality of university level educational services within its region . . . A greater range of services should be delivered through the USP Centre in each country. The Centres should be re-conceptualised and operated as University Centres, not simply Extension Centres (UGC, 1996, 24).

This emphasis on distance and flexible learning by the UGC has continued in its most recent report covering 2000–2002. The theme of “Re-inventing the University” was taken up in the USP's Strategic Plan. The challenge is to give it practical effect. The roles of the USP Centres are central. They will need to be equipped to operate face-to-face teaching; computer and science laboratories; access through USPNet to teaching and resource materials, including video and live lectures; and improved data and communications through USPNet to make them truly an integral part of the university. Students will be taught through blends of traditional and new methods, “multimode” in the current terminology (UGC, 1999, 27).

This very clear call, and the determination of the UGC in recent years to closely monitor the university's performance in relation to its recommendations, has meant that there is a determined effort to advance the goals of the Strategic Plan in relation to distance education.

The Strategic Plan and the Support Plan for Distance and Flexible Learning

The preparation of the Strategic Plan also provided an occasion to indicate firmly our intentions regarding distance education. Furthermore, having indicated our intentions, and being under pressure to translate the Strategic Plan into detailed activities at the departmental and school levels has also led the university to further develop distance teaching.

The general directions of the Strategic Plan were expected to be translated into an action plan, and this was attempted in the Support Plan for Distance and Flexible Learning approved by the University Council in October 1999. It attempted to identify specific strategies and activities, with measurable outcomes, that would advance the objectives of the Strategic Plan in relation to distance and flexible learning.

In specific terms, the Support Plan aimed to ensure that:

All future course development for distance delivery would be more focused, giving first priority to courses that would enable the completion of entire programmes of study by distance;

All first year courses would be offered by distance delivery within the next three years;

A comprehensive quality management system would be developed for distance education;

A Development Plan for Centres would be ready by the end of 2000.

USPNet 2000 Preparing Distance Education for Major Expansion and Improvement

Effective distance education in the South Pacific presupposes the existence of effective telecommunications systems. When distance education began at the USP, it started to make pioneering use of satellite communications. A rudimentary satellite-based network was started in 1972 with assistance from the Carnegie Corporation and staff from the University of Hawaii. Later, USAID made a substantial grant of US\$700,000 to finance the establishment of terminals at ten Centres (Renwick, King and Shale, 1991, 12). This was an impressive vote of confidence in the university's distance education

programme. Enthused, the COL Report commented:

Few university extension departments then or since will have succeeded in negotiating a project that was so expensive and so complex technically and logistically. When it was finally completed, expenditure was closer to US\$2 million (Renwick, King and Shale, 1991, 12).

The new network was based on the Applications Technology Satellite-1 (ATS-1) supplied as part of the Pan-Pacific Educational and Communication Experiments by Satellite (PEACESAT) project using a redundant satellite donated by NASA. The network was crude and partial as it provided only half-duplex voice communications and only half of the Centres were covered. Centres that did not have satellite communications were linked with the HF radio service. Furthermore, a PEACESAT system was serving a large number of uses, giving the university limited access and little planning flexibility. Furthermore, ATS-1 had uncertain life.

After the initial experiment in telecommunications under the PEACESAT system from 1971-1973, the university operated its own network within PEACESAT from 1974-1982. In 1982, NASA withdrew its support for ATS-1, making it very unreliable. The system continued until the ATS-1 drifted off-course in 1985 (University Extension, 1986, 1).

There was no telecommunications support for distance education from then to October 1986. A request had been made to the Forum (the annual meeting of the Pacific island leaders) to help the university set up a viable telecommunications system for distance education. The South Pacific Bureau for Economic Co-operation (SPEC), the Secretariat to the Forum, was asked to assist. With its assistance, the university negotiated with the regional telecommunications providers, and

through a consortium headed by Fiji International Telecommunications Limited (a partnership of the Fiji government and Cable and Wireless) a service was put in place in which INTELSAT provided space segment free of charge for two years and the local telecommunications agencies provided landlines from the national grid into the university's headquarters and Centres. In subsequent years, Cable and Wireless (Hong Kong) provided this space segment free of charge. This service covered six countries – Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. Kiribati was disconnected after some time because of its demands for unsustainable tariff. Kiribati,⁷ Nauru, Niue, Tuvalu and Samoa were covered by high frequency (HF) radio services. Tokelau, Kiribati, and Marshall Islands were not connected to the USPNET at all.

This system was a huge improvement on the PEACESAT system in that it was available 24 hours a day and was under the direct control of the university. However, the system suffered because it covered only half of the countries, and experienced frequent downtime resulting from landline difficulties. The half-duplex system restricted its use and the lack of integrated voice and data service made the system inadequate in an environment where demands were growing rapidly.

The university therefore began to seek funding for an upgraded system that would provide a better technological basis for distance education and for supporting administrative and research needs. The outlines of such a system were agreed to in the early 1990s by the Communications Policy Group, and articulated in Chandra (1992).⁸

The requirements were seen as:

- Independently owned and operated

- Available 24 hours a day
- Integration of voice and data
- Cost effective and reliable
- Capability to expand and link with other systems (see Chandra, 1992).

The initial proposal was made in 1992 to the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, and it took over three years to finally decide that it could not fund it. Fortunately, however, in 1996, the then chancellor of the University of the South Pacific, President Amata Kabua, raised the issue of USPNET with the Government of Japan. The Government of Japan expressed a desire to fund the project and the first mission was dispatched in 1997. After three missions and the report of the design study team, a contract was signed in Tokyo in December 1999 for the supply and installation of USPNET.⁹

While the initial proposal for USPNET was made to Japan, the prime minister of Japan approached both Australia and New Zealand to join it in the project. Ultimately, USPNET became a four-way partnership with Japan as the lead donor and New Zealand and Australia, and the university itself providing additional funding. The donor contributions are shown in Table 3.

The USPNET 2000, as the system is now called, was launched on 30 March 2000, and is now operational. Its total capital cost was just over US\$7 million, with an annual operating cost of about US\$450,000.

USPNET 2000 breaks new ground in telecommunications and learning technologies at the USP. The new system has extensive features. It:

- Covers all twelve member countries whereas previously less than half were fully covered

Table 3 • The Contributions of the Project Partners

Development Partner	Site assisted	Station type
Japan	Fiji	Hub
	Samoa	Mini-hub
	Marshall Islands	Remote
	Solomon Islands	Remote
	Tonga	Remote
	Tuvalu	Remote
New Zealand	Cook Islands	Remote
	Nauru	Remote
	Niue	Remote
	Tokelau	Remote
Australia	Kiribati	Remote
	Vanuatu	Mini-hub
University of the South Pacific	Site preparation at most sites; meeting shortfall in Japanese Grassroots Projects in Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu; meeting video costs for Japanese-funded sites	

Source: *Unpublished files, University of the South Pacific.*

- Provides integrated full-duplex voice, data and video capabilities
- Video capabilities include the ability to beam live compressed video on three channels simultaneously, or alternatively to combine video broadcasts with videoconferencing all on 128 kbps channels
- Integration of telephony and fax services – although these are still being developed
- Full internet services to all Centres and campuses, although the gateway from the USPNet 2000 is from Fiji at commercial rates.
- Full technological capability, because of the use of global beam INTELSAT satellite, to use direct internet if license is granted in the future for this.
- Associated learning technologies and infrastructure at the campuses and the Centres. For instance
 - The campus-wide backbone has connected all the main buildings of the university with fiber optics, giving full ability to carry data, voice, and video. Similarly, the other two campuses have been upgraded to fiber optic backbones.
 - Three sites are now operational for live lecture transmission; the main lecture theatres are now being equipped for video transmission; a number of videoconference facilities now exist, and a state of the art communications room is being developed to support administrative functions.

The new system is operated by the university itself, which is a major achievement, and is being further developed as we quickly discover the need to expand and overcome constraints.

Review of Distance and Flexible Learning at the USP

Given that the last review of distance education was undertaken in 1991, given that the university's programmes for distance education are at a cross-road, and given the launch of the USPNet 2000, the university commissioned a comprehensive review of distance and flexible learning in May 2000. A team of three experts from the United Kingdom and Australia have now nearly finished the review and produced a draft report.

The team was asked to undertake a comprehensive review of the whole operation of distance and flexible learning, and to comment in particular on the plans already approved by the University Council.

The review team has made a number of recommendations that should lead to more focused work in distance and flexible learning, greater authority in the Vice-Chancellor's Office for distance education, greater integration of different modes of delivery - in particular moving from the dual track system to a more integrated system, enabling greater quality management, and providing for experimentation with different methods of teaching and learning. The team is also encouraging greater institutional research and its use in decisions about teaching and learning.

The Political Crisis and the Speeded-Up Integration of Different Modes

The taking of the elected government by armed civilians on 19 May 2000 and the ongoing political crisis in Fiji has created significant problems for the USP, especially in relation to the organization

of its academic programme, staffing and finances. For the purposes of this paper, I will deal only with the problems of teaching and learning.

It became impossible to continue teaching after the elected government was taken hostage. The university then brought forward the semester break of students and hoped that after the break of three weeks, students would be able to return, complete their studies and sit their examinations. Students from the other eleven member countries all went back to their respective home countries. It became apparent that the crisis would not be resolved quickly, and it became clear that students could not come back - or were not being allowed to come back by their governments.

In this situation, the university decided to hold examinations in the member countries - and in centres throughout Fiji, utilizing the network normally used by distance education. This was the first time for the two systems to be truly integrated, and the experience is proving useful for the future plan of greater integration.

Furthermore, as the university plans what it might do for second semester, the options presented by distance learning are being used. A decision has been taken, for the first time, that courses that are available by distance will not be taught in face-to-face mode. This will mean that about 44 courses will not be taught face-to-face - this will reduce duplication, ensure better support for distance learning, reduce staff workload and allow the development of other courses for flexible delivery.

On the recommendation of the management, the University Council approved an approach for the second semester whereby the university would offer face-to-face teaching (except for the 44 courses mentioned above) for students able to return. For students not able to return, the Council has asked that the university provide alternative

delivery arrangements. As a result, about 40 courses will be delivered by a combination of live and recorded video. A similar number of courses will be offered in Science, Technology, Computing Science, and Performing Arts in a summer school mode, for students who would come to the Laucala campus in December to February. Some summer schools will also be offered at the various Centres, and some courses will also be available by Internet. The university is also considering the possibility of making a limited number of online courses available to students from other universities.

The stage is set now for an energetic programme to integrate the different modes of delivery of courses, and to make a larger number of courses and complete programmes available in member countries. In other words, the transformation of the USP into a flexible, multimodal institution is expected to be pursued with renewed energy and commitment.

Possible Lessons from the USP Experience

There may be some useful lessons from the USP experience and I highlight some of these below:

The importance of close monitoring of the work of the universities. In the case of the USP, the guidance and the monitoring of performance by the UGC has been an important factor in the speed and nature of the change in distance learning. There is little doubt that without this oversight and guidance from the UGC, we would not have reached the stage we are at.

The importance of periodic external reviews of sections. The internal system is able to make some changes, but independent external reviews are useful in presenting different perspectives, and in ensuring that distance and flexible learning practices keep pace with

rapidly changing international practice. The COL Report of 1991 played an important role in the development of distance education at the USP and the forthcoming report on the review of distance and flexible learning will no doubt play an equally important role.

The importance of proactive leadership. The leadership of the Distance Education Committee, of the Academic Committee, and of the Senate have all been important in ensuring that distance education does expand and improve. The commitment of the senior management has been important in providing guidance to the director of University Extension in terms of strategic direction and the need for good performance; in terms of resourcing, particularly in a competitive funding model; and in giving clear signals that the management is prepared to take appropriate action where there is nonperformance. It is vital, in this respect, to build a strong constituency within the organization for distance and flexible learning.

The importance of a strong vision in relation to telecommunications and learning technologies. In the case of the University of the South Pacific, the strong push for USPNet came from the management, going back to the early 1990s through the Telecommunications Policy Group, and more recently from the vice-chancellor and the deputy vice-chancellor.

The key role of staff development. The USP has always had a strong programme of staff development through which it provides a range of opportunities for staff - formal training leave for Master's and PhD studies; short-term attachments; conference leave; sabbaticals and leave without pay. More recently, the programme has become more focused and strategic. There is continuous emphasis on staff development, and staff

development targeting USPNet and associated course development requirements are being given special priority. Within staff development, one of the important initiatives at the USP has been leadership development covering all levels within the university. At the upper levels, leadership development has been an important instrument for disseminating the mission of the university, and to seek commitment from senior managers for the initiatives in the Strategic Plan.

Devolved management of the Centres - and the importance of allowing the Centre Directors to be the university's "ears and eyes", giving the central management an honest appraisal of what is being required in the region, and how distance education and the university as a whole are being perceived.

Future Plans and Aspirations

The Strategic Plan had already projected significant expansion and improvement of distance and flexible learning. Since then, this momentum has been increased, especially with the completion of USPNet 2000. Moreover, the process of seeking additional funds from the University Council has meant a continuing articulation of the importance of distance and flexible learning, and our plans for the future - to the University Council, to the main donors, and to the university community. This constant reference to our vision, and a campaign to win the support of the staff members has significantly improved the support for the new initiatives.

In the meanwhile, the donors themselves have been giving support to distance learning, and urging the university to prioritize distance learning. The UGC, in its turn, has been monitoring what we are doing to advance distance and flexible learning.

Finally, the political crisis since May 19 2000 has also forced the university to draw more on the network for distance learning than it has done in the past - and to explore options for a true integration of different modes of delivery. The management is certainly committed to the transformation of the university from a dual-mode university with step-sisterly treatment of distance learning to a multimodal, flexible learning institution, utilizing the latest information and learning technologies to provide relevant, cost effective and internationally recognized educational programmes.

Notes

1. This date is taken as the first courses were offered to off-campus students in 1971. A Reader in Extramural Studies had actually been appointed in January 1970.
2. The member countries are Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.
3. A University Centre typically comprises a director, two lecturers, and some administrative support staff. It normally has some classrooms, a science laboratory and a computer laboratory. Not all centres are fully equipped yet. A Development Plan for Centres is expected to be prepared by the end of 2000 for the consideration of the USP Regional Ministers of Finance in early 2001.
4. This total includes students from self-funding programmes excluded in Table 1.
5. The gross domestic product of Fiji, by far the largest financial contributor to the university, is expected to contract by 15 percent this year. Furthermore, the fact that this is the second time in a decade and a half that there has been a major political crisis in Fiji has already made many member countries very

anxious about the long-term future of the university as a regional institution.

6. Even with the current increases of fees, on-campus students pay about 32 percent of their total cost, and distance students pay about 16 percent. The governments cover the remaining cost under a complex funding formula.
7. The HF radio services to Kiribati had been cancelled from 1989 due to licensing restrictions (Maitava, 1992:4).
8. The meeting of the Communications Policy Group chaired by myself held on 13 May 1992 had decided on the basic requirements of the new system.
9. The complex contract was signed by representatives of the governments of Fiji, Samoa and by Professor Rajesh Chandra on behalf of the University of the South Pacific, as well as the governments of Australia and New Zealand with the main supplier, Mitsubishi Corporation.

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