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COVID-19 and online learning experiences of Solomon Islands students at the University of the South Pacific

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## COVID-19 and online learning experiences of Solomon Islands students at the University of the South Pacific

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### Abstract

*This study aims to investigate the experiences of Solomon Islands students during the shift to online, remote teaching during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It utilises the tokstori to collect data from 16 Solomon Islands students of the University of the South Pacific's (USP) Suva and Honiara campuses. It is framed and analysed data using Khan's eight dimensions of gauging successful e-learning experiences. Prior to COVID-19, many of the courses at the USP were offered in blended mode, which encompasses both online and face-to-face delivery. However, with a sudden move to fully online offerings, and the associated fears resulting from the unknowns of COVID-19, this was disruptive and traumatic for many students. However, analysis identified several key factors aiding student success including many Solomon Islands students being able to eventually cope with the disruption and displayed independence and resilience. It is also found that Solomon Island students got to experience new applications and tools such as, for example, having to be in Zoom or having to sit an online exam. This study has potential to inform higher education institutes (HEIs) in the Pacific Islands and beyond, and the need to carefully navigate the practical realities of the islands in the interaction between digital technologies, instructors and students to facilitate online learning post-pandemic.*

### Keywords

COVID-19; Solomon Islands; Tokstori; Pacific Islands

### Introduction

With the threat of COVID-19, many educational institutions worldwide had to go online to enable their students to continue studies, while countries attempted to curb a disease that was rapidly taking lives and for which a treatment is not yet available. Associated with that threat were calls for social distancing, hand washing, mask wearing and lockdowns, necessitating the USP to move teaching online. Universities had to make swift transition into online learning, as social distancing was a health requirement, to avoid community transmission (Murphy, 2020). Crawford et al. (2020) investigated 20 countries' higher education responses to COVID-19 and found that there were those that made quick



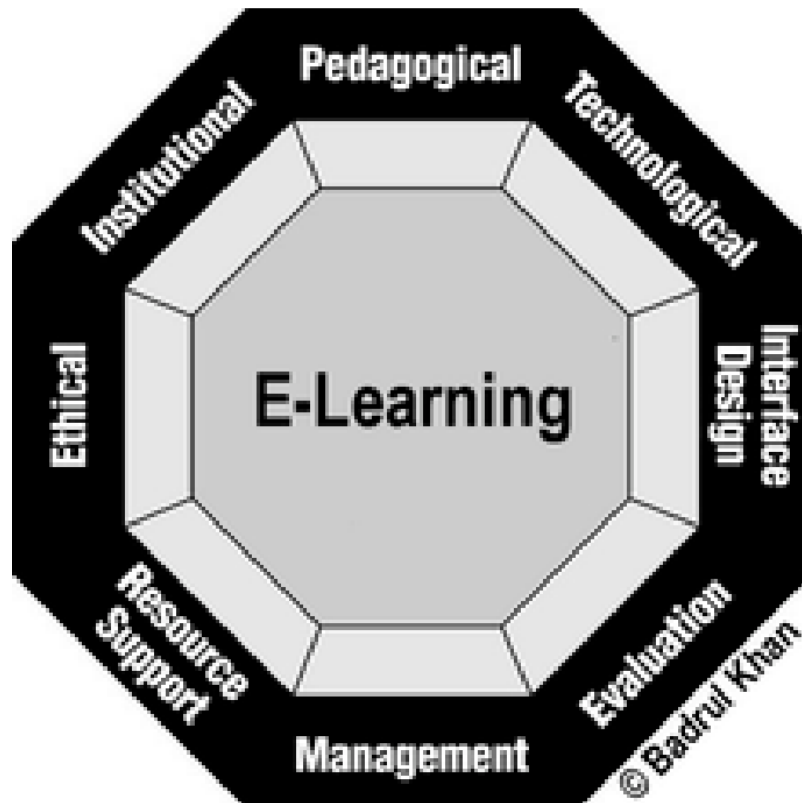
responses through putting courses wholly online while on the other end of the spectrum, there were institutions that had not much of a response. Most of the developed countries closed their campuses and shifted online, while a number of developing nations closed the institutions but also implemented varying digital strategies. In Jordan, for instance, their higher education institutions (HEIs) used Skype, Google Classroom, Moodle and Facebook and engaged students with the resources that they had. COVID-19 would test the agility of higher education institutions (HEI) but also the disparity in resourcing among HEIs and for those students that were socially disadvantaged access to technology and the internet could be major issues (Crawford et al., 2020).

Online learning involves learning and teaching procedures completed in cyberspace (Araujo et al., 2020). Araujo et al. (2020) found that the sudden online learning situation caused stress for many students, citing loneliness and related uncertainties. Furthermore, students who had access to internet may have been able to take part in online learning while there were those who couldn't due to social inequality. Moreover, prolonged disruptions due to the coronavirus outbreak could have had negative psychological impact on students (Araujo et al., 2020). COVID-19 is a disruption to higher education. It took two years for many HEIs to recover from the SARS epidemic; thus, it would take a lot longer than that to recover from COVID-19. Predictions were made that enrolments may drop in the range of 15 to 25 percent (Dennis, 2020). HEIs across the globe had to re-adjust their academic calendar due to COVID. Classes, examinations and graduations were cancelled. Many universities had to go online which required planning. Institutions that had already had a level of sophistication in their digital learning platforms had far less barriers than HEIs that lagged in e-learning (Demuyakor, 2020).

Online learning is growing in HEIs but all of a sudden, during the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions and their staff had to experiment with e-learning on an unprecedented scale (Demuyakor, 2020). Demuyakor (2020) studied students who were at Chinese universities and found that they felt going online to be a great initiative as they understood what the COVID-19 pandemic meant if there was societal interaction. However, the high cost of internet to be online for their studies in isolation could've be an impediment and also at certain locations the internet connectivity could be slow (Demuyakor, 2020). The right of students to access education during emergencies is critical but often the reality on the ground can be different, especially in developing countries and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) occurred, a situation that was unplanned, requiring moving from traditional to remote teaching (Affouneh et al., 2020). It may be a difficult period caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but as Jito Vanualailai, the USP Deputy Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching, stressed, it is an opportunity to re-look at the focus of the university and the educational vulnerabilities of its member countries, as USP is co-owned by 12 small Pacific Island countries: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Samoa. As a consequence of the unplanned nature of e-learning during ERT, HEIs must take into consideration the quality of its virtual courses. Thus, this study aims to investigate the question: What have been the experiences of Solomon Islands students during the shift to online learning during the emergency remote teaching and learning as a result of the COVID-19?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Affouneh et al. (2020) recommended Khan's eight-dimensional framework to assess an institution's e-capability and student experiences during ERT (See Figure 1):



**Figure 1. Eight dimensions of Khan's e-learning framework. (Khan, 2001, p. 46)**

The eight dimensions of Khan's e-learning framework (Khan, 2001) are the *institutional dimension* which entails the administrative affairs such as information technology services, instructional development and media services, or graduation; academic affairs, such as staff support or workload; and student affairs, such as course information, library support, or tutorial services. The second dimension is the *pedagogical dimension* which concerns teaching and learning, and the manner in which the e-learning environment is organised in terms of objectives, design, approaches and methods. The third aspect of the framework is the *technological dimension* which covers infrastructure planning, hardware, and software in the e-learning environment. The fourth dimension is the *interface design* which examines the page and site design, content design, navigation and usability of the e-learning programme. *Evaluation* is the fifth dimension which is interested in the assessment of learners and in the evaluation of the delivery and learning in the e-learning environment. The sixth dimension of *management* refers to the maintenance of the e-learning environment and distribution of information. The seventh-dimension deals with online *resource support* to allow a meaningful learning experience for students. *Ethical considerations* form the eighth dimension which takes into consideration e-learning issues that relate to social and cultural diversity, geographical diversity, information accessibility, etiquette, and legal issues of privacy, plagiarism and copyright (Khan, 2001).

Digital learning technologies for education and schooling have advanced so much at levels never experienced before. Thus, success in e-learning systems would require systemic and systematic analysis of its design, development, implementation and maintenance of the online environment (Corbeil et al., 2017). Corbeil et al. (2017) stressed that Khan's e-learning dimensions are important to gauge the successful experiences of students in the digital platform. Popescu (2012) used Khan's eight dimensions for quality online learning to investigate the perceptions of students on e-learning at their institutions in Romania and France. Sarmiento (2010) framed a study on e-learning in the hospitality and tourism industry in Portugal based on Khan's dimensions of e-learning and that these factors are intertwined to improve quality and productivity. Parlakkilic (2018) conducted a study on medical education in Turkey,

employing Khan's framework to find solutions to various gaps in the online culture. Salyers et al. (2014) also encompassed Khan's framework to conduct a multi-institutional study of e-learning in Canadian universities (Salyers et al., 2014). Therefore, these and other examples demonstrate the reliability and value of Khan's eight dimensions in the assessment of e-learning.

## Tokstori

Paulsen and Spratt (2020) discussed their utilisation of the *tokstori*, as indigenous methodology, to deliver a literacy intervention programme at Temotu Province in the Solomon Islands. Paulsen and Spratt emphasised that in order to be contextually responsive in interventions, it is important to incorporate indigenous methodologies. Paulsen and Spratt (2020, p. 146) also asserted that "an understanding of the place and role of the language of communication is another consideration in indigenous methodologies". This is relevant in a country such as the Solomon Islands where there are 71 active languages spoken in addition to English as the official language and pidgin as the lingua franca. Communicating with locals in a language they can understand cannot be understated in conducting research in indigenous communities but also in these cultures it is through oral tradition that knowledge gets passed, validated and legitimised down generations (Paulsen & Spratt, 2020). Pidgin was used in the *tokstori* and translated into English. Privileging indigenous epistemology is also a means to decolonise research that is predominantly executed from western paradigms.

*Tokstori* is a process, cultural norm and relational in nature (Sanga et al., 2018) and is also linked to the *wantok* system, which is a network of relationships. *Tokstori* is relational and involves interconnectedness and the origins of the term is from pidgin-speaking Melanesia (Sanga et al., 2018). Sanga et al. (2018) added that *tokstori* is an "element of negotiating relatedness in an ongoing way. Being a *wantok* through *tokstori* implies being involved in the creation of a negotiated understanding of the world" (p. 7). Both *tokstori* and the *wantok* system are contextual and relationality is a principal underpinning value and new realities can continually be constructed through *tokstori*. In addition, metaphors could be used by people quite regularly during the *tokstori*. Examples given were that in a *tokstori* a teacher commented that many of the teachers in the school were not performing because they "sit down in front of a big mountain and breathe on it" (Kabini et al., 2018, p. 10) or another participant encourages the researcher to accept what she was saying as "a snake rotting in your mouth" (Kabini et al., 2018, p. 11), which means she cannot share what was asked for as it is confidential. You could miss considerably if one does not interpret the various metaphorical languages that takes place in *tokstori*. In fact, if you ask an elder a question, he/she is likely to tell a story or use metaphorical language to explain something (Sanga et al., 2018). Solomon Islanders, for instance, would generally be suspicious of each other so creating a conducive environment for a *tokstori* is important. When a *tokstori* occurs, it is often not time bound, as in a start and a finish (Sanga et al., 2018). In this study the *tokstori* we had went for a considerable length of time. We collected information for our project but the *tokstori* continued with food and coffee.

Following the collection and transcription of the *tokstori* responses, all participants were sent their comments allowing for accuracy. The credibility of the data is ensured when participants suggested deletion or modification of certain information from the transcripts were incorporated. Utilizing *tokstori* at a literacy intervention programme at Temotu province in Solomon Islands, Paulsen and Spratt (2020) employed *tokstori* as an "engagement tool" (p. 148) in the initial profiling and co-creation of the literacy intervention. Importantly, Paulsen et al. (2020) deliberated that even if a research project or an intervention may have its aims, it is integral that imposition of an intervention or programme does not occur without profiling and knowing the context and situation. Paulsen et al. (2020) also used the *tokstori* in their Leaders and Education Authorities Project (LEAP), not only to do the initial profiling but also paving the way for the actual intervention that is co-created and co-constructed. These get into four cycles of profiling, implementation, sense-making and repeating it again. They acknowledge that

schools where they were conducting the study may find this tiring and time consuming but it allows participants ownership of the project. The LEAP project, even though internationally funded, is delivered and managed wholly by local academics and administrators (Paulsen et al., 2020). This is noteworthy as researchers from outside often get in as helicopter researchers (Minasny & Fiantis, 2018) who fly into developing countries, get data, fly out and analyse it elsewhere with no involvement of local expertise. Thus, Minasny and Fiantis (2018) expressed that while there are international researchers who genuinely work with local expertise, ‘helicopter’ ones should be discouraged and dishonoured.

This study is a *tokstori*, and as in a *talanoa* (Vaiotei, 2006), it sought to elicit the stories, issues, realities and aspirations of participants. They may have different origins and construction but they are important in the understanding of lived realities of Pacific Islands people. Sourcing stories and the sense making requires understanding of the kinship, ranks, cultural peculiarities and gender in the context. The *talanoa* is a conversation that is subjective and oral and avoids rigidity and hegemonic control. Properly conducted, a *talanoa* can gather very authentic and deep insights into the phenomenon. With cultures that value reciprocity it is critical to be sensitive to the social lives of Pacific peoples (Vaiotei, 2006). As Farelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012) cautioned, *talanoa* should not be mistaken as an informal open-ended interview but a conversation in a cultural context that takes on board the values of empathy, respect, love and humility. Respected in many Pacific Islands spheres, the *talanoa* is an open dialogue that values interpersonal relationships that are deep and reciprocal in nature. Importantly, Pacific methodologies contribute to decolonising research in the region (Farelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012), in which the *tokstori* adds to these conversations.

## Methodology

This study employs the *tokstori* as a means to collect data from 16 Solomon Islands students. Three female and 13 male participants. Twelve of the participants were from the Laucala Campus (Suva, Fiji) of the University of the South Pacific (USP) while four were from the Honiara (Solomon Islands) campus of USP. Of the 12 participants, four are postgraduate students while the remainder are undergraduates. Participants’ ages range from 21 to 55. There were three separate *tokstori* sessions, two of which were held at the Laucala campus and the other at the Honiara. The *tokstori* sessions were held face-to-face. The Honiara-based co-author conducted the session in Solomon Islands. Done over food and coffee at the food court on campus, the sessions went for far more than an hour with useful conversations.

Information from the *tokstori* were organised into Khan’s eight dimensions of e-learning to gauge the experiences of Solomon Islands students during the shift to online learning during COVID-19. The data analysis is deductive (Gray, 2014) in that the data is analysed utilising an established framework rather than being inductive where analysis occurs from themes emerging from the data itself. Moreover, consent was received from participants. They were aware of the purposes of the *tokstori*.

## Findings

This information is put under each of Khan’s dimensions of e-learning:

### Institutional dimension

During COVID-19, USP staff were advised to be more flexible in assessment deadlines and Solomon Islands students did appreciate that. This has enabled many to complete their assignments and tasks:



The good thing is that the lecturers are more flexible in the due dates because my mood for studies is the same but the situation is causing issues, but when the flexibilities came in, I gained confidence to continue. (PG2)

In terms of leniency, even it's late for two or three days from the deadline, we were able to submit which I find good. When you are under pressure from the tasks that were due around the same times, but due to the leniency, you get to cope with it. You can do your submissions without marks taken out, which is helpful, during this C19 period. (UG5)

The university also worked with the phone companies in Fiji to enable free access to the University of the South Pacific (USP) website. Besides this collaboration with the phone companies, internet in Fiji is comparatively cheaper than most other Pacific Island countries:

Because they have deals with the phone companies, the internet is even more affordable here, which is great. (UG2)

Here [Fiji] the internet is good than the SI the internet is too expensive [*sic*]. One gigabyte can be 24 hours and it's finished in SI. As I mentioned earlier, it helps you to stay at home during C19. There is another second wave coming so it's nice to keep yourself in terms of health and safety. You are likely to be safe because you stay at home. (UG6)

Students at the Honiara campus in Solomon Islands found the cost of the internet a challenge in the shift to being fully online:

It was challenging because as a private sponsored student I had to spend a bit more on data usage, which is a bit expensive here in the SI and the timing to use internet here in the SI is very fast that I had to think and work fast. Sometimes my data was all used up while I am still searching and thinking about what to write. So, for me online learning is good, but internet usage is very expensive and gave me a hard time. (HN1)

I found it difficult to access it at times and I had to pay for my own internet access. I bought a Dongle from SI Telekom with the help of my children. It costs SBD\$600.00. (HN4)

The Honiara campus, being proactive in informing and assuring students, also helped in the retention of many at the Honiara campus. The announcements, aired through the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC), were a pertinent way to reach Solomon Islanders through what it called 'service messages':

I was going to go home but my family encouraged me to just stay and wait for further advice from the University. I stayed in my house most of the time and then I started coming to the Campus to get an update on when Campus will be reopened. I was happy when you started making announcements through the SIBC. That gave me a sense of hope that things will get back to normal and that the Campus will be reopened. (HN4)

Solomon Islands students also recognised that USP dynamically put forward measures to ensure continuity of learning during this emergency situation:

In schools, you have what's called Education Emergency (EE) and ... was my facilitator. This is a kind of situation that's like when we have earthquakes, the ethnic tension, but this is a new one. In EE, even if there is [*sic*] emergencies, learning must continue. So, with that theory that we were preached before, applies now. I tell myself; this theory is at work now. The environment changes, but education must continue. (PG1)

## Pedagogical dimension

Sudden COVID-19 instigated isolation and shift to the online mode of learning helped many Solomon Islands students to be focused and independent despite related hardships:

In terms of learning, one of the advantages or pros was that I remained at home and focused on my work. I stay at home as everything is online and concentrated on assignments, which is nice. Feedback from lecturers is up to date. You give assignment and they give you feedback quickly. (PG2)

It helps you to be an independent learner. There wouldn't be group discussions in many cases so being an independent learner is important. (UG3)

However, the abrupt shift to the online mode, accompanied by fear of COVID-19, was traumatic and a major disruption for other Solomon Islands students:

When the interaction that should take place between the student and lecturer was cut off, so this online mode was a new thing for me. The contacts through tutorials were not there. The USP too was closed down so there was no access. Those disruptions affect your determination and it also traumatized me. (PG1)

So, when online mode was in place, I have a lot of challenges encountered such as the lack of intimacy, bond and rapport, where the student as a learner has with the lecturer is missing. At first, it took me a while to adapt to this online learning. This intimacy is missing. The face-to-face transfer of knowledge from lecturer is missed. It was a challenge in the first place. (PG4)

Subjects that had hands-on components were also seen as a challenge even though these Solomon Islands students managed to navigate various online applications:

During this C19, especially in the Sciences, where practical labs need to be attended to but because we are online, it's difficult to do the labs you need to where microscopes and other real life practical activities that are needed on the field can be an issue. This can be a difficulty going online. There are courses that I find easier online. (UG5)

I learned to submit my work on time and also developed a set of skills to get information for whatever lab or practical activities that I am supposed to do. You also learn to work by yourself. You stay at your room and simply work by yourself. (UG1)

## Technological dimension

Students at the Honiara campus reflected on challenges of access. Campus generally ensured all they could to see the retention of those at the Solomon Islands campus. However, general long-term neglect of USP of the Solomon Islands campus infrastructure still prevails:

I tried to access that but I could not access it. I asked other students and they said they could access it, but there were some of us who could not access it even though we followed the instructions that were provided. So, I just continued to pay for data through SI Telekom. (HN2)

When the Campus was closed due to COVID-19 I was going to withdraw from studies. But when we heard through the media that we were going to be given free access to the USP website then I decided to continue with my studies. So, I came with other students to the SI Campus Netball court to access our courses. I found it difficult at first but one



of my wantoks who worked at the SI Telekom assisted me to access the USP website through the arrangement that was made. (HN4)

Solomon Islands students based at Suva in Fiji may not be widespread but can still experience access issues. Technological access can be more than access but also have implications for those that are economically disadvantaged:

In terms of disadvantage, it depends on your location. Where my house is, the internet service is not that good. Sometimes it doesn't connect well, so I couldn't do anything. Sometimes I attempted coming through security for the labs because I couldn't do anything from my home. But luckily, everything got halted for a while. (PG3)

The other disadvantage is the cost of internet. That's the other thing. It's an economic disadvantage of being online. It can be demanding. Even if the university was re-opened, the fear still puts many students [off] not to come to campus due to the fear. (UG4)

Many Solomon Islands students, however, learned new technological applications, tools and functions:

But in terms of online learning, before I didn't know what is Zoom. Now we use Zoom and I know more of things online and the internet and the resources we can access to help us in our studies. In Moodle, it has a chat section and most of the time I don't use it, but during the online transition, I used it to contact the course coordinator. It's good that we have such things so even if we are not face to face, there are things available to get in contact with the coordinator. (UG2)

### *Interface design*

USP uses Moodle as its Learning Management System and Solomon Islands students appreciate various functions in it such as online group interactions:

On that same note, this online mode doesn't provide that mode where as a tertiary student we can have group work and coming together. (PG4).

I tried to perform at a higher level, to discuss, to share ideas, through the online mode. So, the ability to work hard showed itself. This is a good thing I learned from this pandemic. (PG4)

Being online in Moodle is found by Solomon Islands students to be convenient for COVID-19 situation. You can do your work anytime you want to:

An advantage of online learning is that access to learning is with you at home. You wake up it's there. The classroom is there. Even the teacher is there. There is still a classroom and a lecturer that's there, doesn't matter where you are 24 hours. It's also safer for us when we are under pressure from C19. There could be disadvantages as my friends have said, but it has also given me confidence. The information is always there. It can be convenient. (UG4)

A good percentage of USP courses are already in blended mode so the transition may not be as drastic as the ones that were heavily face to face. Thus, many students are often versed with the online platform:

However, if you are new to the system, it can be hard as well. For those that's new to them, online is hard. But for me, because I know the system, online is fine. Thank you. (PG2)

## Evaluation dimension

During the COVID-19 online period, there were lecturers that Solomon Islands students found to be diligent in providing feedback:

In terms of learning, one of the advantages or pros was that I remained at home and focused on my work. I stay at home as everything is online and concentrated on assignments, which is nice. Feedback from lecturers is up to date. You give assignment and they give you feedback quickly. (PG2)

There was experimentation with online exams during COVID-19, replacing what is normally face to face exams. They were generally liked except for certain ones that were perceived to be excessive:

I also like the online exams. They gave us time to sit together and because I can discuss with my colleagues and write down my answers. (HN4)

Online exam was good. Timing was good and we can discuss with each other. But, the amount of work required was enormous. There were case studies we had to respond to. We had to respond to all three sections within three hours. (HN2)

I agree with online exam gave us the opportunity to go back and revisit those concepts we learnt during the semester. For me, it gave me the opportunity to really read and better understand what I learned during the semester. (HN3)

There were also complaints that certain courses were not very clear in their explanation of assessment pieces, which caused confusion:

A bit of complain [*sic*] comes from students that some information are [*sic*] not clear for students to follow. There was a situation where others did something and others did another thing. This is because things were not clear and when the grades were returned, the marking, some of them gained a certain mark because they did the wrong option, while others who followed what was needed got different marks. This was caused by confusion in the instruction given. When you ask for explanation, they send in an explanation that often causes more confusion. We all end up doing different things. (UG4)

## Management dimension

In terms of the maintenance of the online system, it was suggested by Solomon Islands students that USP would need to continually innovate in the practical subjects and elements of it:

I did practical courses that need face to face elements with the coordinator and being online can be hard. I am doing GS, with coding and technology, so that's why I said it's good to have face to face with coordinators and without that, it can be hard at times being online. The lab and practical parts can be a difficulty. (UG1)

There were also suggestions to build the capacity of students in online learning. Students are used to the blended mode, which has face to face components to it:

However, the other issue is the decision to change to full online learning, which was done over a very short span of time. So, to quickly adapt to such change in the mode of teaching and learning within a short time was quite challenging. There was no briefing for us students on online learning especially those of us who are used to blended learning mode and are used to having satellite lectures and tutorials. We are used to our lecturers

explaining things to us. I also find it difficult when I emailed my lecturers for assistance and they did not respond to my emails for days. (HN1)

USP continued to find ways to make courses accessible to students but also trained its staff to recognise that their role in the student experience was critical:

As a private sponsored student, I find using the SI Telekom data plan expensive. Online learning is different from face-to-face mode. I had to do things on my own. Sometimes, I find it difficult because our lecturers did not respond to my emails. (HN4)

### Resource support

Solomon Islands students miss the face-to-face element in teaching but that is almost inevitable in an online course:

The difference is that, things on email, a lot can be missed. But when you come face to face with a lecturer or coordinator, he/she would talk in more detail. (PG2)

The other is the lack of face to face with your lecturers. When you are face to face with the lecturer, they will give you [an] answer and you can ask extended questions to clear up things. But through email, it's just one thing and you often hesitate to follow up further. (PG3)

As stated in the previous section, staff need to be skilled and supported to be effective in keeping students engaged in their classes online:

The other thing is that we have different lecturers, so for me, with my lecturers, I emailed for the time I liked an answer. But an answer came a couple of days later before when a reply came, when I don't need the answer, which disrupts my mood for the tasks. Exchange of emails with my lecturers isn't that good during that time. (PG3)

Students needed support from everyone who had an interest in their studies:

It was challenging especially when you are far away from home and in this kind of situation, you need to be encouraged by your immediate family members. The good now is that I see my colleagues, our lecturers, and the interactions we have, has kept on encouraging me to come this far. (PG4)

### Ethical dimension

A participant was robbed in Suva at his home during the COVID-19 period when USP went to remote learning:

On personal grounds, this C19 adds on the stress to where I live. I live at an outskirts area where access to internet could be interrupted at times. On top of that, I experienced being stolen twice. It has affected me in my learning. The stress to adapt to the online mode, and when I got stolen twice where I live, I was really stressed. I got stolen twice, they took the school bag, the phone, money, trousers, and I almost gave up. This is in addition to challenges I already have in the online learning mode. (PG4)

This has impacted on his studies but he used the situation to work harder and be resilient:

A good thing I learned from the online experience is it made me to be [*sic*] resilient. My hidden abilities came out. I took my own initiatives to manage my time so that I can be

settled. I tried as much as possible to do my assignments, discuss in the forums, during the time frame. (PG4)

## Discussion

In Australia, the loss in income for its universities could be approximately \$19 billion by 2023 as a consequence of COVID-19 and with international education being the fourth largest export, it is a concern for HEIs (Thatcher et al., 2020). It is also the fear of losing students through attrition and the possible revenue loss that the University of the South Pacific (USP) did all it could to have almost 100 percent of its courses on remote learning and teaching when the COVID-19 pandemic affected the world (J. Vanualailai, Personal Communication, April 30, 2020). Vanualailai, the USP Deputy Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, emphasised that COVID-19 has essentially forced the institution to re-focus strongly on student learning and teaching. He advocates the Centre for Flexible Learning and Teaching (CFL) and the Information Technology Services (ITS) to be the two major sections that need strengthening to ensure USP delivers quality programmes remotely. Faculties, schools, the student association and campuses were asked to track participation of students and flexibility was given to assignment deadlines (J. Vanualailai, April 30, 2020). Students in this study appreciated the level of support and flexibility built into the remote learning and teaching mode.

However, despite a successful response by USP, it certainly was not perfect, and Solomon Islands students point to staff who did not reply to student emails, their Moodle set up and contents are confusing and ambiguous, and internet access can be costly, particularly for students at the Honiara campus. This did not help when there were also fierce battles over various allegations between the former and incumbent Vice Chancellor. Field (2020) reported that according to an audit by the international accounting firm BDO from its Auckland office, during Rajesh Chandra's period as Vice Chancellor, there were allegations of the manipulation of allowances, bonuses and inducements for 25 senior staff of USP adding up to more than \$4 million between 2016 and 2018. Moreover, Pal Ahluwalia, who compiled allegations against Rajesh Chandra's management, was deported as an 'undesirable person' from Fiji (Delaibatiki, 2021). There were a lot of related dynamics to these events and in the USP situation, Naidu (2020) stressed that the arguments for and against what was happening in the governance of the university needed to consider the "cultural milieu, the power relationship and politics that impact on governance at USP" (p. 8). Whatever the situation is, Ram (2020) correctly voiced that while other universities are strategising on how they would stay afloat in the coming semesters due to COVID-19 and its effects, particularly financially, USP confronts ongoing governance issues. Ram asserted that instead of discussing viable models to push the USP forward and possibly required restructures, the institution is spending its time arguing over governance issues (Ram, 2020).

What this study also implies is that the impacts of COVID-19 and its experience in online learning are not of the institution itself, it also has an influence on the students, parents, their families, and the community. Participants who are in Fiji are concerned and worried about their families in the Solomon Islands. With COVID-19 related unemployment, crimes may increase. (One of the participants was robbed twice.) In Fiji, where tourism is the major industry (Singh, 2020), the domino effects of unemployment from the tourism industry and its related services is considerable. The study also implies that this unprecedented shift to the online mode have repercussions for how technology is used, assessment in HEIs were conducted, classes ran (Crawford et al., 2020; Demuyakor, 2020), and in the USP-context, as long as they are not inferior alternatives. Arauja et al. (2020) reiterated a word used by a participant, that this situation is a 'disruption' that HEIs must adjust to in order to survive.

USP generally responded well to the COVID-19 pandemic and provided ample support and flexibility on assessments and in settling fees, which enabled a large number of students to get through. There were proactive measures taken, including communicating diligently with students to help them get through the semester. Gelles et al. (2020), who interviewed 11 university students in the US, found

that in the university these students went to there was “compassionate and flexible pedagogy” (p. 1) that enabled adjusting assessments and the curriculum delivery. In addition, Gelles et al. (2020) also found that the university communicated with students effectively which was critical in the retention of students. It was evident from participants that university communications were crucial in students’ perseverance with their studies during the pandemic. Participants in this study were very anxious of the COVID-19 situation, but with the reassurance from the university, managed to complete the semester. In addition, post-pandemic, it is integral that USP should continue to systematically promote technology-based learning.

Despite initial adjustments to courses being fully online, Solomon Islands students in the study agreed that the shift was necessary in a time of crisis. The USP Centre for Flexible Learning (CFL) also did well by providing training and support for staff. One of the drawbacks participants alluded to was the absence of face-to-face opportunities with lecturers and hands-on activities for practical activities. However, students managed to persevere and complete the semester. They get to learn to be working independently online and getting to learn new technologies as a consequence such as being on Zoom regularly or sitting an online exam. In a survey of 109 countries, Marinoni et al. (2020) found that almost all acknowledged that COVID-19 affected teaching and learning at their institutions with challenges related to online pedagogy competencies and the technical infrastructure. Moreover, Marinoni et al. (2020) also found that it impacted international student mobility. Solomon Islands students based at Fiji were affected in terms of thinking about their families and not being able to travel. International mobility would have been impeded throughout the world.

## Conclusion

This paper presents findings from three *tokstori* sessions of 12 Solomon Islands students who studied at the University of the South Pacific (USP) during the Emergency Remote Teaching period due to COVID-19. Framed against Khan’s eight dimensions of e-learning, which are pedagogical, institutional, ethical, interface design, evaluation, management, resource support and technological in nature, it suggests that it is important that USP not only makes the transition in content but also builds the online pedagogy of its staff in order to continually improve the university’s offerings. The online solutions should not just be temporary band aids but platforms that USP can build into as vibrant online, remote teaching and learning programmes relevant to the Pacific Islands and beyond. Students appreciated the flexibility USP incorporated into due dates and school fee payments, indicating the need for learning to be flexible and agile to the needs of students. What was often referred to as the ‘new normal’ in the media, one of those elements would have to be digitally literate Pacific Islands students and teachers. That should be one of those things that comprise the ‘new normal’. The sustainability of the technological and design shifts required resource support which included collaboration with stakeholders, as in the Fiji situation, the mobile companies had positive support for students in terms of providing cheaper internet. However, USP, as a regional university with 12 member countries, the internet may not be as affordable as in Fiji. The internet costs in Solomon Islands are extremely high and students in this study acknowledged it as an impediment to the online shift. This calls on university management to continually evaluate its online offerings and equity in the region. Post-pandemic and with an already rapidly changing world, Pacific Islands HEIs have to emerge from COVID-19 stronger, as the pandemic would have changed the educational landscape considerably.

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