

Policies and Procedures

Flexible Learning Policy

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Responsible Officer:	Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Learning, Teaching & Student Services
Policy Editor/Contact:	Pro Vice-Chancellor Flexible Learning & Director Centre for Flexible Learning
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1 Background and Purpose

- 1.1. This policy provides the parameters for the adoption and integration of flexible learning and teaching at the University of the South Pacific (University) that are suitably aligned with its learning and teaching policy and its regional and distributed nature (Policy Number: 1.6.2.17).
- 1.2. Nothing in the policy directions articulated here shall imply that teaching and learning at the University exists in a binary form (i.e., face-to-face or flexible forms), or that any model of educational transaction at the University is in any way less adequate than another.

2 Policy Provisions

2.1 General

The regional nature of the University requires that flexible learning is core business of the University and central to its mission, goals, operations, and the following must be adhered to:

- (a) Planning and scheduling of flexible learning rests squarely with the Faculties and Schools of the University as part of its normal operations;
- (b) The teaching staff in the Faculties and Schools are required to integrate flexibility in its core teaching and learning activities;
- (c) On-line learning must be increasingly rolled out to promote appropriate levels of flexibility in relation to the time, place and pace of student learning activities and experiences across all modes of education at the University, including residential face-to-face education on campus;
- (d) Faculties and Schools are required to progressively adopt digital technologies such as online learning management systems and lecture capture tools to carry the educational content and engage with learners; and
- (e) To be able to address issues around equity and access, especially where the availability of technology (i.e., computers and the Internet) is going to be limited, and where economies of scale allow, the printed study package will remain the carrier of the core educational content.

3 Teaching Staff

- 3.1 Academic staff in the Faculties and Schools will be selected and appointed from the outset on the premise that they will be engaging in flexible learning and teaching at the University.

- 3.2 Upon appointment, all academic staff will have access to a wide range of support services in relation to flexible learning from within the Faculties and Schools, and from central support services such as the University Library and the Center for Flexible Learning.

4 Curriculum and Delivery

- 4.1 The flexible learning curriculum at the University will be developed from the same Syllabi that is used to develop courses and programs that are offered in the face-to-face mode on campus.
- 4.2 The delivery of these courses and programs in flexible modes will be orchestrated by the Schools responsible with the help of the University infrastructure and its support services.

5 Student Learning

- 5.1 Assessment of learning outcomes, regardless of the mode of learning and teaching at USP will follow the requirements and standards that have been developed by the Faculties and Schools and adopted by the University.
- 5.2 These requirements and standards will be uniform and not vary across different courses regardless of the degree of flexibility they may integrate as part of the learning and teaching transaction in any mode of study.
- 5.3 All formal course examinations taken by students, as part of any mode of study, will be proctored and taken in person at the local Campus.
- 5.4 Course work and assessment items undertaken and/or submitted online will be authenticated with procedures and processes, including tools such as Turnitin, to ensure that all online learning activities are valid and undertaken by the registered student.

6 Contracts with Vendors

- 6.1 The University may enter into formal agreements with providers of IT and related technologies, as well as other educational resources in order to support a high quality educational experience for all its students and faculty.
- 6.2 These contracts are negotiated and entered into, through existing officers of the University including its legal services.

7 Quality Assurance Processes

- 7.1 The evaluation of the student flexible learning experience comprises an integral component of the University's quality assurance processes and procedures.
- 7.2 This evaluation will adopt a wide range of strategies using both online and off-line tools for routinely collecting data on all aspects of the student study experience for reporting, and its use in the review of courses and learning and teaching at the University.
- 7.3 Any discrepancies in the findings for different cohorts and courses will be dealt with and addressed as part of routine reporting on quality assurance procedures and processes at the University.

8 Related documents

[Value Principles - Annex 1](#)

9 Definitions

For the purpose of this policy the following definitions apply:

Term	Definition
Flexible learning	Is a state of being in which learning and teaching is increasingly freed from the limitations of the <i>time, place</i> and <i>pace</i> of study. But this kind of flexibility does not end there. For learners, flexibility in learning may include choices in relation to entry and exit points, selection of learning activities, assessment tasks and educational resources in return for different kinds of credit and costs. And for the teachers it can involve choices in relation to the allocation of their time and the mode and methods of communication with learners as well as the educational institution.
Online and e-learning	Are identifiable by the type of technology that is part of the learning and teaching transaction. <i>Online learning</i> is learning while being connected synchronously and/or asynchronously, while e-learning is learning with the use of electronic tools.
Blended learning	Also referred to as hybrid learning is about blending modes of study such as online learning with periods of face-to-face residential learning and teaching or printed study packages as is the case at USP
Distributed learning	Is when learners and teachers are operating while distributed over a virtual and/or physical network of resources, and learning and teaching opportunities.
Disaggregated learning	Reflects an evolving learning and teaching space with various aspects of the learning and teaching transaction devolved to various parts and parties, and not confined to the form and function of subject matter expert(s).

10 References

This policy has been developed with reference to the following documents, which are acknowledged:

- Statutes of the University
- The University of the South Pacific Strategic Plan
- Quality of Teaching Policy
- Open Educational Resources Policy
- Learning and Teaching Policy
- Flexi-School Policy
- Code of Professional Conduct for Academic Staff (Academic Freedom)
- Online student support services framework (SMT Paper 6th March 2016)
- Academic Approval Framework
- ACODE Technology Enhanced Learning Benchmarks
- Commonwealth of Learning Review Report

Value Principles

Flexible Learning

- (a) Flexibility in learning and teaching is a value principle, much like diversity or equality in education and society more generally. Flexibility in learning and teaching is relevant in any mode of study including campus-based face-to-face education.
- (b) The adoption of flexible approaches to learning is central to the ethos and culture of the University. Its distributed nature required the University to engage in flexible learning and teaching which it has done since soon after its establishment, with the need for flexible approaches to learning and teaching at USP growing in order to open up access to further enrich the educational experience of students beyond its conventional campus-based educational operations.
- (c) In the early days of this initiative, flexible learning opportunities at the University went by the name of “extension” studies suggesting an effort by the University to extend credit bearing learning and teaching opportunities beyond the boundaries of its physical campuses. The print technology and the postal mail service formed the backbone of this learning and teaching transaction. As information and communications technologies including electronic mail began to supersede the use of print and the postal mail, the concept of written correspondence via the postal service was no longer an adequate descriptor of the educational transaction that was taking place.
- (d) About then distance education emerged as a term that better captured the nature of this learning and teaching transaction away from the physical campuses. But that term has issues as well, as an accurate descriptor of this activity, as the concept of distance implied a physical separation, when that was not always the case.
- (e) As many more options for engaging in the flexible learning experience became available to learners and teachers, and as students chose to take advantage of the opportunities that these choices afforded, the nature of the educational transaction changed as well. And depending on its emphasis, this form of learning and teaching activity has also been labeled variously as online learning, e-learning, blended learning, distributed learning, and disaggregated learning.
- (f) The determination of the nature and levels of flexibility in learning and teaching in a given context depends on several interacting variables, such as the nature of the subject matter, the level of study, location of students and teachers, their readiness for flexible learning including their access to technologies and the necessary infrastructure.
- (g) However, one size or approach to flexible learning does not, and will not fit all learners, teachers or disciplines. There will be a need for different approaches to learning and teaching, with different levels of flexibility, structure and guidance for different cohorts and learning contexts, while the threshold value principles of all approaches remain the same. These threshold value principles are as follows:

Open and flexible access - this is about inclusive, equal and flexible access to educational opportunities without barriers such as entry qualifications and ability to pay. *Value principle:* All lives have equal value.

Open learning - this is about the ability of students to be able to study and learn at any time, from anywhere and at any pace. *Value principle:* Freedom and the flexibility to choose the mode, medium, time, place and pace of study.

Open scholarship - this is about the release of educational resources under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation, repurposing and redistribution by others. *Value principle:* Education is a basic need that should be accessible to all, if we were to achieve education for all and move towards a path to real freedom, justice and equality.

Dimensions of Flexibility

- (a) A useful approach to embedding flexibility is to see it in relation to how, and to what extent flexibility is being integrated in leveraging key dimensions of learning and teaching, and these are as follows:
- **Learning experience design** - this is about the design and development of productive learning experiences so that each learner is able to make most of the learning opportunities they afford.
 - **Learner-content engagement** - this is about learners' engagement and interaction with the subject matter in ways that suit individuals, their styles and approaches to studying and its time, place and pace.
 - **Learner-teacher engagement** - this is about choices learners have in relation to the mode and method of their engagement and interaction with their teachers and tutors.
 - **Learner-learner engagement** - this is about choices learners have in relation to the mode and method of their engagement and interaction with their peers in small and large groups, and in offline and online educational settings.
 - **Learner engagement with the learning environment** - this is about adaptable access, interaction and engagement with the learning environment (such as with mobile devices, Wi-Fi access and innovative use of study space).
 - **Learner engagement with assessment activities** - this is about choices learners have in relation to the fulfillment of their assessment requirements.
 - **Learner engagement with feedback** - this is about choices learners have in relation to access to feedback on their learning and assessment activities.
 - **Learner engagement with the institution** - this is about choices learners have in relation to their engagement with the services of the educational institution.
- (b) The goal in relation to the adoption and integration of flexible learning is about getting the balance right between the degree of structure and guidance on the one hand, and openness and flexibility on the other, in order to promote and achieve *effective, efficient* and *engaging* learning and teaching experiences. The aim is to move from a position of baseline adoption and integration of flexibility in learning and teaching, to aspirational goals and targets.

Quality of the Infrastructure.

- (a) While flexible learning is NOT synonymous with online education, online learning tools and technologies will increasingly serve to provide the infrastructure for flexible learning as the adoption of online learning expands at the University.
- (b) Currently at USP, the backbone of this infrastructure is MOODLE (which is an open source online learning management system) that supports this form of learning and teaching transaction.
- (c) Any additional teaching support is provided to the students from their local campus within the country using a wide variety of strategies including face-to-face teaching, and satellite-based audio conferencing with staff from the Laucala Campus.
- (d) USP has been a pioneer in the use of many of these methods, especially in the use of satellite based audio-teleconferencing in teaching and learning as part of its flexible learning operations, as well as in the design and development of print-based course packages to support it.
- (e) The goal of increasing flexible learning opportunities will be to offer students in the USP region who are unable to attend a physical campus in their own country or elsewhere, opportunities to continue to pursue their studies.

- (f) Academic integrity in all of these matters will be governed by a single set of policies for teaching and learning at the University.
- (g) And the role of the regional campuses and the Campus Directors is crucial in their execution at the local level to ensure that the integrity of the operation is assured.

Curriculum and Delivery

- (a) The curriculum of flexible learning and teaching in the Faculties and Schools will have undergone a high level of rigor using a course team approach in its design and development, as a result of which its quality will equal to, or be better than that of exemplary practices in comparable courses and programs offered F2F on campus and in situ.
- (b) Orientation and onboarding programs for staff on *Learning How to Teach Online* is developed and strengthened to support this kind of activity as the adoption of flexible and online learning expands across programs in Faculties. These initiatives will include skilling of staff in the:
 - i. Promotion of learner interaction with their teachers using a wide variety of modes and methods of communication, both offline and online.
 - ii. Promotion of learner interaction with the subject matter using a wide variety of active learning strategies.
 - iii. Promotion of student peer interaction with the adoption of a wide variety of strategies in small and large groups, and in both offline and online educational settings.
 - iv. Use of synchronous as well as asynchronous technologies to support effective, efficient and engaging learning and teaching.
 - v. Design and adoption of flexible approaches to the assessment of learning outcomes.
 - vi. Design and use of flexible approaches in the provision of feedback to learners on their learning and assessment activities.

Student Support Services

- (a) Because of the practice of flexible learning as a mainstream learning and teaching activity at the University, all students who are studying in any mode will have full access to all the core student support services of the University.
- (b) The local Campus and its resources provide any additional support required by those away from the Laucala Campus and it may include face-to-face teaching, academic advisement, study space and library support services.
- (c) Orientation and onboarding programs for students on *Learning How to Learn Online*, is developed and strengthened as the adoption of online education expands in educational programs in Faculties.
- (d) These initiatives include, among other things, the skilling of students in the promotion of *learner interaction with the educational organization* and its services using a wide range of ways irrespective of their location or physical condition.

Connection to the Institution

- (a) Students of the University, will be able to make choices in relation to their studies regardless of their physical location and circumstances.
- (b) Students choosing to study in a manner, time and place that suits them best will have access to all the usual support services afforded by the campuses of the University. These services will include

apart from library services, places for private study, and face-to-face teaching that might be offered or necessary.

Retention and Graduation

- (a) As flexible learning forms part of mainstream educational processes at the University, the collection of a wide variety of data on student retention, their progression and graduation is embedded in the University's core planning, development and quality assurance processes.
- (b) This kind of analytics includes monitoring of learner and learning behaviors, data warehousing, and working with big data, building models and predicting trends, and reporting to improve learning and teaching at the University as well as its business processes.
- (c) USP students, many of who are part-time students with families and jobs to sustain, may have a higher tendency to withdraw, or fail to persist with their course of study for very personal reasons, which are not related to their educational programs. For this reason alone, the University takes very seriously the gathering of intelligence on all of its learners in order to ensure that the educational opportunities it affords, more than adequately meets their needs.