



A DWU student working online. (Photo: DWU Marketing)

Increasing blended and online learning in PNG universities: the DWU experience

By DWU Teaching Staff
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As the world adjusts to the health and economic impacts of COVID-19, commentaries are being written on the circumstances and responses of specific countries. In regard to Papua New Guinea (PNG), the narrative is largely negative, with headlines such as, [‘We have nothing’: Papua New Guinea’s broken health systems brace for COVID-19](#) and [Coronavirus could see Papua New Guinea, Indonesia become failed states](#). Missing in these analyses is attention to the creative possibilities that often emerge in response to change and uncertainty.

The higher education sector in PNG is one of many required to develop innovative strategies that limit face-to-face contact and adhere to social-distancing restrictions. This blog post documents the experiences of a team of lecturers at PNG’s Divine Word University (DWU), as they move to increased use of blended and online learning.

As a response to the impacts of COVID-19 on DWU’s academic calendar, some lecturers are attempting to deliver units fully online by distance for the first time, in addition to the university’s existing [blended learning programs](#). While undergraduates living on campus have resumed classes, repeated in smaller class sizes, blended learning students from other provinces are currently unable to travel to the University’s main campus in Madang without undertaking a two-week quarantine. University staff are uncertain about the number of prospective students who will be able to engage in blended learning programs in 2020 due to technological challenges that pre-date COVID-19. DWU students living outside of town centres do not always have reliable access to the internet, and [internet prices](#) in PNG are among the highest in the world. While recognising the many challenges, the authors see the social distancing restrictions as an important opportunity to advance the use of technology in higher education in PNG.

The challenges identified are likely to be familiar to academics in high-income countries such as Australia. Yet there are a number of limitations that make the PNG context unique.

Bandwidth limits and lack of paid subscriptions to online platforms mean that it is impractical to deliver lectures via video broadcast. A one-hour Zoom meeting, for example, would consume a significant portion of a lecturer's daily data limit. Most lecturers therefore rely on Moodle, an Online Learning Management System, to share learning resources and facilitate student discussion via e-forums and chat. Social distancing restrictions are increasing the use of Moodle and also re-invigorating attention on the capabilities needed to support effective blended and online learning.

The shift to blended and online learning is not without consequence on student experience. Humans are relational beings and harmonious relationships are an important feature of social life in PNG. Communication between teachers and students via a computer can affect the [quality of the relationship](#) and contribute to a sense of isolation among students. [Maintaining student attention](#) and engagement via a small screen is difficult. Contribution to discussion forums, especially when not linked to grades, can be poor. Most students also have multiple responsibilities, such as family and employment, and they do not always have the time management skills to balance these effectively. A strength of online learning however, is that it challenges students to change from [passive listening to active participation](#). It calls for the adoption of new teaching strategies that facilitate [student-centred learning](#). Yet it takes time and effective training for academic staff to learn new technological and pedagogical skills. Facilitating online activities is also time-consuming for academic staff that hold a range of competing responsibilities, and for whom use of technology can be perceived as an additional task.

Student feedback points to the strengths and weaknesses of blended and online learning. Some students say that it is more difficult to understand technical and complex concepts (e.g. the calculation of binary codes in Information Systems units) in the absence of face-to-face interactions with lecturers and classmates. Lecturers also observe limitations in the basic academic skills of students (e.g. note-taking and identifying key components of academic texts). This adds further challenges to moving content online, which given bandwidth and data limitations, can rely heavily on text-based resources. A key strength of online learning noted by students, however, is that it is convenient, and students can more easily work at their own pace and according to their particular circumstances. Yet this can also be problematic because in many instances, lecturers find that assessment tasks are not submitted on time.

The need to adapt to social distancing restrictions at DWU has highlighted genuine eagerness among staff to learn new technological skills to meet a range of learning needs. Staff attendance at workshops on tools such as Active Presenter have exceeded capacity.

Staff are also engaging in skills-sharing at a more individual level, offering assistance on hosting Zoom meetings and recording PowerPoint presentations. There is a further opportunity to learn from lecturers at other universities in PNG, to learn how they are responding to similar circumstances and limitations.

In regard to the technological opportunities, it is hoped that the Coral Sea Cable System linking Sydney to Port Moresby will provide [faster, cheaper and more reliable communications infrastructure](#) to PNG, including increased bandwidth for DWU's regional campuses.

An important, yet currently untapped, idea to reduce internet expenses for students is to partner with internet service providers to support online learning. Internet service providers with a strong presence in PNG such as [Digicel](#) could provide students with access to digital learning resources freely or at reduced rates - a practice that has been adopted by telecommunication companies in [Rwanda](#).

One function of the higher education sector as a social institution is to meet the needs of society through academic excellence and producing skilled human resources. The circumstances posed by COVID-19 have heightened the need for universities to respond to change - perhaps faster than current technological capabilities allow. The experience at DWU is showing, however, that academic staff within PNG's universities are eager to embrace change and to develop new competencies to support student learning. In the context of negative headlines concentrating on PNG's deficiencies, it is important that examples of creativity and adaptability that also characterise life in 'the land of the unexpected' are not diminished.

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and the Pacific](#) series.

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