

University of the South Pacific students' voices about improving their campus experience

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This study investigated the factors that students feel can lead to improved student experience at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Framed on Astin's theory of involvement, our study used two methods to collect data. The first was through the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) process, a consensus-building tool, with 9 students in a half-day workshop. The second method was interviews with three students from the NGT sample, to have them expand on the results of the NGT. We found that students are, firstly, more concerned about the physical environment and services on campus such as having more conference rooms at the library to discuss, water fountains around the campus for drinking, and more power points at study huts. Secondly, the students were concerned about the need to have programs that develop skills and knowledge for the industry and the workplace. The third factor that students were concerned about was the need to have more variety in social activities such as sports and fun days, quiz competitions, and debates, among others.

Literature review

This study sought to investigate what university students feel can contribute to quality of student experiences at USP. Many universities in the world are seeking ways and developing strategies to enhance positive student experiences. With world rankings of universities in mind, creating positive experiences for students is critical, according to Shah and Richardson (2016) who analysed the strategic plans of 33 Australian universities. It is student feedback and experiences that quality assurance agencies often use to benchmark an institution against others. Quality of student experiences has become an imperative to be closely monitored (Shah & Richardson, 2016).

Dean and Gibbs (2015) emphasised that students should be considered as consumers whose satisfaction is critical, not merely as a learner. Students should demand more for the value of their money as consumers and that student satisfaction should be a major indication of quality higher education. Moreover, they found that students with higher satisfaction and happiness to their university experience also have higher optimism about the future (Dean & Gibbs, 2015). They stressed the importance of managing quality and enriching student experiences and their ability to meet societal demands and become well-rounded citizens. Moreover, Shah and Richardson (2016) pointed out that quality student experience should not be sought only in learning and teaching plans, but should also appear prominently in university strategic plans. However, there needs to be alignment between the institutional strategy and what happens in practice in terms of student experiences and the monitoring of those experiences. These need resources being put into ensuring there is quality student learning and productive learning. Such alignments can also be tagged to individual staff and their performances (Shah & Richardson, 2016).

There is no doubt that student satisfaction is important and with increasing use of communication technology and online learning, studies need to be done in the USP context. Shah and Richardson (2016) voiced a reminder that students are the most important clients of the university. This is too often neglected, and services and expectations often lag from what students and stakeholders want. Moreover, they also pointed out that student experiences go further than the classroom and cover so many other areas of campus life such as sporting facilities, leisure and recreational opportunities, shops, quality of food outlets, bookshops, and so forth (Shah & Richardson, 2016). Quality student experience according to Tan, Muskat and Zehrer (2016) is the “total life experience which encompasses both academic and non-academic experiences as a student” (p. 5). Quality student experience involves positive student life in the classroom, out-of-classroom, in cultural and social, and in the physical infrastructure that influences student satisfaction at the university (Tan et al., 2016). Tan et al. (2016) emphasised that having deeper understanding of the student experience can help universities deliver quality and relevant education.

McInnis (2003) emphasised that universities often think that students should fit into them, but today’s students increasingly expect universities to fit with their lives rather than them fitting into the institution. Universities can achieve this through choice and flexibility in programs, courses, amenities, social activities, campus entertainment, and course delivery, to name a few. In addition, with the diversity of the student population, catering for such variety is a critical marker for universities and sustaining quality student experiences. This requires understanding racial and ethnic diversity, the needs of those who are working, and reasons why students may disengage (McInnis, 2003). This includes reviewing relationships between various aspects of university life and what might hinder student engagement. It may be student catering, poor timetabling, poor facilities, overcrowding, teacher-bias, and so forth. Importantly, “this means bridging the gaps between academic, administrative and support programs – a substantial challenge for many universities” (McInnis, 2003, p. 13).

Furthermore, Tight (2019) discussed the “neo-liberal critique that student retention is mostly financial drivers” (p. 702). That is, insufficient attention is given to what is best for students, whilst more interest is focused on ensuring the universities are receiving the highest number of student fees. According to Tinto, (2006), the view on “retention has changed in the late 1900s” (p. 2), arguing that how we view student retention has shifted to consider the role of the environment, particularly the university, in student decisions to continue or leave. The higher the student engagement and their positive experiences are, the less the likelihood of students leaving university before completing their programs (Tinto, 2006). It is not just helping students to better adapt to the university they are studying at, it is also the institution having the responsibility to adapt to the students it admits.

Dorovolomo et al. (2017) investigated matters for which students at a Pacific Islands university are hesitant to seek assistance, finding there is often tentativeness towards seeking assistance at the library, asking for help in their writing, working with academics on projects or socialising informally with staff, and having serious discussions with students from other countries. The library is a service that can promote student success, for example

helping students to use the databases and indexing system, and their use of the library as study space. Activities to facilitate staff-student interaction and peer engagement with those from other countries outside the classroom need to be promoted, including having students on university committees (Dorovolomo et al., 2017). Often, the lack of approachability among staff impedes staff-student rapport. The institution should also genuinely put emphasis on promoting diversity and student engagement as important to the success of students and the university (Dorovolomo et al., 2017).

Dorovolomo, Rafiq and Nabobo-Baba (2021) found a consensus among postgraduate students about wanting peer groups being formed as an avenue for mentoring among students who are writing theses. Thesis-writing students also agreed that having staff mentor them into publishing is critical for nurturing them into a research and publishing culture (Dorovolomo et al., 2021). Furthermore, Dorovolomo et al. (2021) recognised the need for academics to view postgraduate students as co-learners, rather than holding onto hierarchical boundaries that did not see staff and students as mutual learners and partners. Inoue-Smith (2020), in the Guam context, argued that student success in higher education is often measured in enrolment numbers, the levels of academics, grants, and research outputs, rather than student satisfaction and positive experience. Student voices matter and should be listened to for improving student experiences and satisfaction at university through various forms of feedback and viewing students as change agents in a university. It is also not about grades and completing a degree but graduate employability and making a difference where they end up working (Inoue-Smith, 2020).

Theoretical framework

This study is premised on the theory of student involvement, which “refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, 1999, p. 518). Students who are engaged, devoted, and involved would, for instance, put enough time into studying, joining university clubs and organisations, interacting with staff and students, and using university facilities and information and communications technology (ICT) services maximally. Engaging with university life contributes to student persistence and completion. On the contrary, when students are disengaged, uninvolved, and isolating themselves, their departure from university becomes more likely (Astin, 1999). Webber, Krylow and Zhang (2013) added that when students are not engaged the eventual repercussion is a departure and dropping out. Thus, the general idea is students can gain more out of university if they invest more in engaging with it (Webber et al., 2013).

Farrell, Jorgenson, Fudge and Pritchard (2018) posited that student involvement theory puts students at the centre of student success. It is through spending ample physical and psychological energy into being involved in the academic and social experiences of the university that a student can persist to graduation (Farrell et al., 2018). Astin’s (1999) theory of involvement stated that students get to learn more if they spend more time in both the academic and social aspects of university life and experience (Hunt, 2003). Hunt (2003) stressed that the quality and quantity of students’ involvement will decide their level of learning, satisfaction with the university experience, and help in the retention of students.

The involvement and engagement of students should be from both the classroom and being involved in university clubs and organisations. In the classroom context, this means having student-staff rapport, providing an environment for active learning, giving prompt feedback, respecting the diversity that appears in the classroom, and having high expectations of students (Hunt, 2003).

McLeod (2011) asserted that listening to the student voice should be an emancipatory agenda for research and practice at university. The student voice should be a political project and metaphor for agency in order to promote inclusion and empowerment. If university senior managers are truly concerned about listening to the student voice, they need not be unsettled by those voices but take them on board. It should not be just about access, entry and exits but a “longer and wider view of student experience” (p. 180) that understands students throughout before, during and after their candidacy (McLeod, 2011). Moreover, McLeod (2011) puts forward four ways in which voice is used in educational discourses, the first being *voice-as-strategy* which aims at achieving equality, empowerment and transformation. The second is *voice-as-participation* as in democratic processes, the third is *voice-as-right* as in to be heard and have a say and stake, and the fourth is *voice-as-difference* which entails encompassing diversity and inclusion. These four uses of voice as a discourse overlap each other (McLeod, 2011), though all do apply to the intentions of our study. Too often, systems want to improve student experiences and outcomes but fail to ask adequately what their opinions are. Listening to the student voice should be embedded in the university system and if they do listen, it is not tokenistic.

Method

We used the nominal group technique (NGT) and structured interviews to collect data.

Nominal group technique

The following steps were used as suggested by Mullen et al. (2021, pp. 7-10).

(a) *Step 1: Individual generation of ideas*

In step 1, participants responded individually to this question, put on the screen from a Word document: “What do you think are some of the factors that can lead to improved student experiences?”

(b) *Step 2: Round robin recording of ideas*

In step 2, each participant was asked to give their responses in a round robin fashion until everyone’s list was exhausted. These were recorded and typed into the Word document up on the screen so that all participants were able to see and read.

(c) *Step 3: Discussion of ideas*

In step 3, participants asked for clarification of any of the points listed that they did not understand, were unsure of, or wanted a little more discussion. These would be summed up to decide the overall ranks.

(d) Step 4: Voting and ranking of ideas

In step 4, participants ranked their top three responses. Their scores (3 for their first ranked idea, 1 for their third ranked idea) were added for display on the screen.

Our study used a 3-point scale for allocating value to NGT rankings (top ranked choice of the participant = 3, second choice = 2, and third-ranked = 1). Allocations of points has varied among recent NGT studies, for example Hugé et al. (2023) also used 3 votes per participant, while Salajegheh et al, (2020) used a Likert-style 1 to 5 scale.

Nine University of the South Pacific (USP) students attending the Laucala campus in Fiji were the participants. The students were from different Schools and were invited for the NGT processes. The researchers provided morning tea and lunch for their participation, as they were there for the NGT process for half of the day. Participants signed a consent form before their participation and USP ethical approval was obtained prior to the data collection. The NGT was introduced by Van de Ven and Delbecq in 1971 (Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1971; Dang, 2015) and stressed that the sample per NGT is best between 7 to 12 participants, even though the numbers could also be higher (Dang, 2015). Dang (2015) suggested ensuring the room accommodates the number of participants and the room is U-shaped and have an open end to allow everyone to see in front. Participants were provided with pens and papers (Dang, 2015).

The NGT processes and interviews were conducted in September and October 2022, at the Laucala campus of Fiji, one of 14 campuses of the USP. The USP has a campus Master Plan: 2019-2030 for the Laucala campus (Sharley, 2018) but with funding impediments, much of this may remain on paper. Worth noting, this plan was written by consultants based in Brisbane and it is unlikely that student views are fully incorporated into this master plan. The authors do not remember any surveys or consultations to get staff opinion before the plan was finalised. Thus, the effectiveness of such master plans may be questionable as to whether they target what all stakeholders want.

Structured interviews

Lucas (2005) stressed that in a structured interview it is important to establish what the purpose of the interview is. Here the main purpose of the interviews is to get a better understanding of the findings from the NGT. We followed the advice by Lucas (2005), such as listing what you already know about the phenomenon, asking questions that elicit deeper information about the topic, and organising questions in an orderly and meaningful sequence. Based on results from the NGT, we used the following interview questions:

1. The group agreed on the need to improve the physical environment such as having more conference rooms at the library, more computers, power points at huts, and drinking fountains. Would you like to add to the conversation?
2. Students were also concerned about services on campus such as opening hours of the library, smoking areas, or shuttle timetables. Would you like to add further?
3. Would you like to expand on the need to have more social activities such as fun days, quizzes, debates, and relevant clubs?

4. There was concern about the need to be more connected to industry and have soft skills for the workplace. Can you elaborate on this?

Three of the students in the NGT sample were interviewed on campus with interview durations of 30 to 50 minutes.

Data analysis

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase was the NGT process and the second involved interviews. The NGT ideas and ratings from the student workshop are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: NGT workshop ideas in the face-to-face responses from students

No.	Ideas	Ratings	Total
1.	Student counselling - Encouraging PASS sessions for those lacking but those who are doing fine seek help often.		
2.	Provide more online forum. Online forums seem fine for students to share or generate ideas opposed to face to face or those who are reserved		
3.	Encourage more workshops for students to build confidence in students. Series of workshops.		
4.	Maintaining healthy relationships/communication between students and staff to improve student experience. Cordial relationships. Considering the deliveries e.g. recorded session. Working closer with students so they are not left alone/isolated.		
5.	Campaigns, clean-up campaign to encourage teamwork and social relations. Cultural relations and exchanges.		
6.	More social activities. Sports day, fun day, quiz, debates. Improve student relations. Creative ideas that engages students.	2, 2, 2, 2	8
7.	Icebreaker during teaching. Involving students with activities related to the concept/lesson.		
8.	Providing more physical environment, e.g. conference room to allow students to discuss. Convenient to students during study breaks for instance extended library opening hours. Accessible drinking water sources. Proper smoke areas. Away from public. Paints a bad picture of the university. More food affordability on campus.	3, 3, 1, 1, 1, 2, 3, 3	17
9.	More gadgets available to students, laptops, PCs to help them complete their work.		
10.	Offering programs that are skilled and practical-based related to industry. Prepare for work life. Hold mock interviews, or write a CV. More soft skills for the workplace. Courses to be industry-approved before offering them. Employability.	1, 1, 3, 3, 2, 3	13
11.	Transparency in their mark sheet and exams. Providing sufficient feedback. Providing sufficient training for students to use the online platform. User friendly.		

12.	Provision of learning resources, textbooks. Having the right, appropriate resources for the course.		
13.	Encourage student lead clubs such as drama, chess club, and so forth.		
14.	Students' evaluations at various facilities for instance, library, hostels, shops, restaurants.		
15.	Providing more tutorial classes with enough chairs. Some classes are too congested so there is a lack of seats and an increase in noise level between rooms. Flexible tutorial times. Having tutorial compulsory are seen as beneficial.	3	3
16.	Encouraging students to help in certain associations and various activities university runs. Students' participation to gain experiences.		
17.	Proper planning of exam venues and courses generally too. For instance, at Oceania Centre. Students should not be casualties of high political issues.	1	1
18.	Changes in the curriculum. Some courses need to be updated. Excessively assessing students. No need for mid semester tests if the course is to have a final exam. Test oriented course.	2, 3, 1, 1	7
19.	Online learning is questionable for many students both in the nature of the course, how it is designed.		
20.	Providing times for shuttles and gate times. Notice boards to display the times for student access. Security guards. Outsiders intrude and steal student's things on campus.	2, 1	3
21.	Streamlining on some of the processes, e.g. contacting your lecturer. Contracts take too long to be sorted.	2	2
22.	Updated information about the campus such as maps, websites too.		
23.	Schedules for cleaners for appropriate time to avoid unnecessary noise on a regular basis. Improve the water supplies during water cuts. Washrooms not maintained. More power points in library, bures, and other places on campus.		

Table 1 shows that two of biggest factors students perceive to be important are conducive physical environments and effective services, and the second is being connected to industry and having the soft skills to transit into work life.

The themes were formed from the main ideas from the NGT and interviews. The acronyms beside participant quotes and excerpts are not actual letters of their names but simply preserve anonymity.

Physical environment, e.g. more conference rooms, drinking fountains, overcrowded tutorial rooms, power points at study huts

Student CJ shared her experiences walking from Damodar city to USP and believes that there is a need for a proper crossing place for students who frequently move in and out of the campus: Without proper facilities LG warns that students can face difficulties such as fainting when accessible water sources are not available:

I remembered, it would be about a month ago now. I ran into the student who was like fainting, walking to class that she had. But you know, her friend was just trying to cool it down but she just fainted and it is clear and simple. She wasn't drinking enough water. (LG)

LG elaborated further on the need for other bure (Fijian house or hut) spaces, power points and heaters to accommodate the growing need for students who opt to work at night:

I find the lack of seats located around campus and seats and bures, one thing that's special about USP is that we the University of the South Pacific, and I think it would be really good for the students to have more bures around, more seats. And with that, also more PowerPoints because, you know, classrooms aren't necessarily open during the day during the evening, and some kids find it easier to just, what we call daylight or stay up all night work late within these bures. I've also added to this when you're working late at night, it gets cold. And so, when kids tend to get noodles or they want like a thermos and they try and locate one of the heaters on campus, the resources and we've got to my knowledge, I think two. There's one Faculty of Business and Economics and this was one at the green tables and also one at ICT, but I think, not the one from ICTs is removed. (LG)

These are critical reflections by current university students where they feel that the physical environment contributes hugely towards the academic program they are pursuing. A high-quality, safe and well-kept university environment, enhances positive attitudes, engagement, and motivation toward students' ability to learn, and eventually their educational accomplishments.

Services, e.g. extended library hours in weekends, affordable food on campus, providing shuttle times, better security, more streamlined processes

Student AS suggested extending the library hours mainly to the ground floor 24/7 and to enforce rules to curb the noise level and misuse of spaces:

I think the library ground floor should be open 24/7. On the ground floor, we don't have books. So, there will be no issue about the misuse and or so what they can do is open the library ground floor for like full time 24/7. And another thing like there should be some kind of strategies to minimise the noise level in ground floor. Like most of the time when we go there to study like students are there talking on top of their voice and laughing so they should actually do something to minimise the noise. Like in the top floors. (AS)

CJ further added the need for attentive security guards on campus to assist students as quickly as possible. The protection and care of students is to be paramount at all times:

Students have been receiving messages to be very careful, because there are some men loitering here who are trying to grab the girls. So, the security needs to be there. Night security because there are people coming in and who are trying to grab some students. Just the recent news that has been happening around here in USP. It is just the students they have been messaging in us Viber groups, they have been putting in messages to be very careful because there are some people who are trying to grab other people, one of the girls. (CJ)

LG suggests that reasonable food prices or placing more thermos or heaters on campus would help students make coffee or boil their noodles instead of skipping meals:

Where there are more thermoses, you know, kids could get just noodles or you know, things like that, because there is no point buying noodles, or a noodle cup, and they don't have hot water. So, it goes right to, and it would be really helpful. I think if they are available. (LG)

LG felt that the university lacks security staff, especially in controlling the students who smoke in front of the campus which invites other non-students and results in mugging:

I did express concern in terms of services in regards to security. I think it is quite sad. I think we're a little bit understaffed on security. We now have this new smoke free campus. I'm not personally a smoker. I've never been a smoker. But how it is done it attracted a lot of unfriendly characters in front of our school. It is a poor sightseeing just students standing in front of a school smoking. But you also have people who aren't students standing there. People just selling, you know, rolls of cigarettes, people. So, it'd be great if security could check up on them, here and there. Because having them around, you know, just attracts a bigger crowd. And I think that heightens risk. I think it was last year, or am not sure last semester, there is one of the exchange students got robbed right in front of USP there. (LG).

These are very important issues raised that can often be neglected by the university, such as safety, the location of smoking areas currently located at the public bus stop, giving a bad image to the institution when students smoke and sell cigarettes there. There is the need for effective security on the campus as students often get robbed and when they are international students it simply is a bad advertisement.

Social activities, e.g. sports day, fun day, quiz, debates

AS agreed to having social activities running beside the various programs students are enrolled in, such as academic quizzes and debates that can boost students' subject and general knowledge:

Looking into the academic areas, they can bring some academic competition, like quizzes and debates that will like help students gain more skills in those areas and actually represent the nation in the university at national level. (AS)

AS suggested that one should choose their team member by judging one's ability to perform during the in-house competition. More so, such competitions can help build networks among the students in various disciplines within the campus, and with other university students too, which creates an openness to learning:

What they can do is when in the semester, they can have like certain competition within University for debates, and then they build up to the national. In that way, they can pick three or four students to present and actually represent rather than just telling certain people only to go to the national debate. Form groups in a more organised way. In debates, you're not just having network within your university but with outside universities as well. You get to learn more from the other university as well. (AS)

CJ stressed that social activities bring enthusiasm to students' normal study life at the university, and these can also include sports days, fun days, art and various other creative activities:

Social activities such as campaigns, sports day, fun day, quizzes, debates, I think these are very important so that students are active, they are engaged. If they're not engaged, they don't have any interest in the study. Because sometimes the theoretical work is very boring, especially for students, students want to be creative. (CJ)

LG elaborated further that social happenings foster community building and regional identity:

It's like building a community. One thing that's beautiful with USP is that we're a regional institution. We have people from different works of life across the Pacific. To my understanding, the idea of USP is to get us to leave school, interact with each other so we're able to almost build this regional identity together. It doesn't necessarily have to be cultural nights. It could be say clubs, it could be a quiz night, a sport today, or a fun day. I think there will be benefits for students, in terms of developing them outside of the academic by making students reach the real world. It's not just your GPA, it's your ability to work with people. (LG)

Opportunity for social activities cannot be underestimated at university. Quizzes, debates, sports clubs, the art, and many more, do have potential to enhance the student experience.

Curriculum, e.g. skill, practical-based, industry-focused, soft skills, employability, flexible tutorial times, unsuitable exam venues

AS emphasised, avoid distributing a larger percentage of coursework as MSTs (mid-semester test). Allocating a smaller portion in written tests, would help students to gain marks in other assignments:

What I think is if we are leaving 50% coursework and 50% exam, then for that 50% that is coursework like we shouldn't have MST. Even if the MST test is there, it should be not like 30% from the 50. At least, make it 10% or 15%. so that there are chances for students to grab as many marks as possible as they could in coursework, and it's easier for them to actually pass the unit, rather than making a mid-semester test 30%. And also, practical-based learning should be there. (AS)

AS also adds that instead of having a write-up assignment, it would be good to have presentations, as it will boost students' presentation skills in a way to advantage them prepare for work-life:

What most of the course coordinators or teaching staff want is just to do a write up, for example, in accounting, when we see we have to do a write up on financial statements of certain companies. So instead of just submitting it in the Dropbox, they should also ask us to do a PowerPoint presentation. Probably, like in that way it will help us bring out our presentation skills. When we enter workforce, most of the times we have to do like presentations, let's say sales for a month sales presentation, watch the figures and things

like that. So, in that way, instead of just summarising everything and giving it to our employer, apart from that we can also present clearly of what it is. (AS)

AS emphasised that tutors or teaching staff should choose a time slot for tutorials or lectures during the day rather than scheduling at 7 pm, to help students who live very far away:

Some of us, we are traveling from far distances, let's say Suva-Nausori corridors and after six is usually traffic time, and then by the time we reach home, it's really late. So having it during the day, it will be easier for those who are traveling from a distance. Having slots during the day, rather than just keeping it in the afternoon from five to six or six to seven. (AS)

CJ talked about the need for practical-oriented programs that relate to industry and the work environment:

We need to practice more to be prepared when we go outside, when you go and engage with other companies, and we need to learn how to give interviews. We need practical. Most of the time, you hardly get a chance. If they make it compulsory, it pushes students, I think, for what is the work environment like. (CJ)

CJ believed the course offered at university should be designed in a way that it is preparing students' soft skills, as preparation for their work life:

It's not only the GPA that matters, but it's also the other aspects of life. So, it's our communication skills, life skills, and other aspects are also important. That we are actually learning to build us to be more confident, to be more prepared to be confident enough to go out there, you know, and work. It's just the soft skills. (CJ)

LG argued the university should at all costs provide students with a conducive environment, especially while they are taking exams:

There were several complaints in terms of the exams from students. We were unable to sit the exams comfortably in an area where, you know, they could just focus. I think, it is extremely harsh. Weather and it's a bit congested. (LG)

There should be judgement on assessments whether the distribution through the semester is suitable, the type of assessments are varied, weighted properly, and when there are exams that the venues are conducive. In addition, whether exams or linkage to industry and avenues to build soft skills are more important.

Discussion

Our study found that the students are concerned about the status of the physical environment and safety on and coming and going out of campus and how that affects their student experience and learning. This covers, for example, overcrowded tutorial rooms, lack of drinking fountains, lack of space at study huts, and the dangers of crossing the road to the campus. De Borba, Alves and Campagnolo (2020) described the influences between

the physical environment and the improvement of student experiences that it brings and the need for active learning, both inside and outside the classroom. Similarly, Baafi (2020) discussed that a “conducive physical environment is an agent of intellectual stimulation and an essential factor in strengthening the child’s educational development” (p. 124). This study gathered that both the classroom and outside-of-classroom environments have powerful influences on students’ ability to perform and attain an extensive range of educational outcomes including soft skills and university-industry nexus. On the other hand, a lack of studying or working space may perturb students’ involvement and impact the quality of student experiences.

The architecture of the physical environment is another factor that students in the study pointed out as affecting their experiences and learning. Poor physical setup can adversely affect the student’s learning environment and the overall academic achievement of the institution. For instance, insufficient drinking facilities on campus have an indirect impact on students learning. Poor facilities can impact the overall achievement of institutional goals (Suleman & Hussain, 2014). For instance, our study found that students who would like to work on their assignments at night do not have many electrical power points or sitting spaces for them to work. Students agreed that providing proper walkways and crossing junctions at the exit gates would support their safety given that the university is located in a suburb near Suva City.

Students were concerned about improvements in various services provided at the university, such as the library opening hours and noise levels, better locations for smokers, reasonably priced meals, *bures* that have sufficient seats and power points, and effective security services. University services play a dynamic role in students’ academic journey and students have to feel reassured that those services are quality. Take the library, for instance, Atuase and Koufie (2017) stressed that students prefer the library “due to its serene environment” (p. 12). Ajiboye and Bankole (2013) stated that extended library services had a substantial influence on students’ performance as it avoided students from getting disturbed by other causes such as hostel disturbances.

At USP, there are ongoing leadership issues, decreasing enrolment numbers, and dwindling finances (Narayan, 2023), improving the student experience is imperative. With negative experiences, the enrolments are likely to continue decreasing. USP, co-owned by 12 Pacific Island countries, cannot sit on its laurels and continue claiming to be the premier university of the South Pacific, when competitor institutions such as the Fiji National University are expanding their influence. While the Fiji government had paid parts of \$100 million FJD due in grants to USP, there are still substantial amounts owing (Pratap, 2023). Naviticoko (2023) explained that these funds were withheld by the Fiji First Government, who previously governed Fiji, as they felt that Vice Chancellor Pal Ahluwalia had breached the conditions of his work permit and an independent inquiry that was called was not conducted (Naviticoko, 2023). Ahluwalia was then based at Samoa, besides a brief stay in Nauru. Despite the USP staff unions’ request that the Vice Chancellor’s contract not be renewed, Ahluwalia was given an extension of two years (Yaya, 2024). The leadership saga at USP for the last five years undoubtedly had serious effects on staff morale, the image and reputation of the university, and the financial health of the university. These problems have

direct impacts on campus infrastructural renewal, university services and eventually the student experience.

We found that social activities such as sports day, fun day, quizzes, and debates can be encouraged to boost student experiences. While there are socialisation opportunities offered at USP, much more can be done. These can strengthen their relationships and brings in diversity and inclusion which fosters a sense of belonging among learners and improves student success on campus. Regarding sports, Broh (2002) found that interscholastic participation has a positive impact on student achievement as it promotes student's development and social ties among them and other interested stakeholders and this benefits student achievement. As one of the participants said, university experience should be more than just the GPA. It should aim to offer positive student experiences that are positive in all aspects of university life. Thus, Baranova, Morrison and Mutton (2011) importantly stressed that the "student experience is therefore seen as a critical area where universities have the opportunity to differentiate their offer and potentially ensure the long-term sustainability of their provision" (p. 122). Baranova et al. (2011) explained that, too often, university surveys are predominantly on teaching and learning rather than on the broader perspectives of student experience. It will require a new mind set from senior administrators for student services. Universities will need to do an in depth evaluation of customer experiences in each step of service delivery (Baranova et al., 2011).

The distribution of the assessments over the semester is critical in relation to the lengths and types of assessments being scheduled. If exams are conducted, it should be in environments that are pleasant and not congested. Participants voiced the importance of university-industry collaborations and the developing of students' soft skills. Pereira and Costa (2017, p. 9) highlighted the significance of soft skills in their education as these enhances students opportunities in a demanding labour market. Bürger and Fiates (2021) stressed that with increasingly complex social and economic landscapes and accompanied by continual changes, university-industry relationships are critical to maintaining and building innovations together and being responsive to the needs of students and industry. Universities have the roles of teaching, research and outreach and need to continually question themselves how well they do these with industry and workplaces (Burger & Fiates, 2021). Swearer (2017) added that with an evolving labour landscape, it is crucial that universities have students accessing experiences both inside and outside of the classroom that should include hands-on attachments to the real world outside the university walls and gates. For example, internships may enable professional development and work-readiness (Swearer, 2017). Universities must prepare students for the realities of the future, not just the current times. Too often, universities can be stuck inside the classroom and have insufficient relevance outside of it (Swearer, 2017).

Conclusion

Findings from this study depict the importance of universities listening to students about the improving of the student experience. Universities, including USP, need to recognise that the onus in engaging students and enabling their persistence is the responsibility of

everyone and the message is to listen to students' voice and incorporate them into the university's improvement plans. Our study is important as positive experiences and engaging and interacting with students at higher education institutions is imperative for contributing to students' adjustment, sense of belonging and satisfaction, and eventually improved achievement. Universities should explore ways in which they could restructure and redesign curriculum both in and out of the classroom so that students are fruitfully engaged and extended in an environment that is supportive, friendly, and productive. Universities have to maximise the importance of building relationships and rapport between staff and students through being approachable, with conducive classroom practices, and activities on campus. There can be university policies and practices that can influence student experiences fully so that they graduate from university with positive memories and lifelong learning skills.

Future research using the same or a similar NGT conducted at other campuses of USP outside of Fiji should be regarded as highly desirable, possibly at campuses in Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. In addition, student experience studies are often overly focused on higher education and future studies could extend into the secondary, primary and early childhood levels in the Pacific context.

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