

# Students' experiences of Open Distance Learning: A Samoan case study

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*The rise of Open Distance Learning (ODL) has created new learning opportunities for teacher education students, particularly in geographically remote small island states. Alongside increasing access to education, ODL is designed to promote independent and self-directed learning. Despite this highly individualised pedagogical orientation, little is known about how ODL is experienced in collectivist cultures, such as Samoa, where cultural practices centre around a deep and interconnected relationality. This article responds to these concerns by employing the fa'afaletui research methodology to investigate the pedagogical experiences of 16 teacher education students in Samoa who were completing a two-year teacher upgrade programme delivered through ODL. The findings reveal those students highly valued relationality at all stages of their ODL programme. Students exercised agency to maintain relational connections by organising informal face-to-face meetings or telephone conversations with fellow students and lecturers to enhance their learning. These findings suggest that relational connections and dialogic interactions were crucial for their learning, despite ODL providing few of these relational and dialogic opportunities. In a time where the global pandemic has accelerated the need for ODL, the findings of this study offer important considerations for the international teacher education community.*

*Keywords: Open Distance Learning; Samoa; distance learning pedagogy; collectivist cultures; in-service teacher education*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Open Distance Learning (ODL) has gained legitimacy as a viable and cost-effective platform for facilitating pre-service and in-service teacher education (Perraton, 1996, 2010). Nations have turned to ODL to increase the numbers of qualified teachers, particularly within the Pacific, where access to higher and continuing education has proved challenging for those located in remote and hard-to-reach islands (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2017; Kruse Vaái, 2016; Perraton, 2010; UNESCO, 2016). The global pandemic has further accelerated this rapid and widespread transition to ODL, with nations throughout the Pacific moving to ODL to continue teacher education programmes during periods of sustained lockdown. Despite this acceleration, ODL has been poorly critiqued and unproblematically accepted as a universal pedagogical panacea, irrespective of culture or context (Cobb, 2018). This article responds to these concerns by considering how culture mediates students' pedagogical experiences in a Samoan ODL programme.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the tragic death of Dr Tagataese Tupu Tuia, this paper was submitted to the IEJ:CP by him and a co-author. Reviewer comments were received by the Editors after his death and the co-author is unavailable to engage in the process of scholarly revision. Despite the co-author being unavailable, the Editors decided to publish this paper in honor of our dear colleague. The Editors asked another close colleague of Dr Tuia to respond to the reviewer comments while being mindful to ensure that Dr Tuia's intentions for this paper were respected. We thank the reviewers for their feedback while acknowledging that, as the last scholarly writing of Dr Tuia, the paper is offered substantially as he intended.

In 2016, the National University of Samoa implemented ODL as a platform to accelerate a teacher upgrade programme for in-service teachers living on the remote island of Savai'i (National University of Samoa, 2017). This programme enabled teachers to complete two years of additional study to upgrade their teaching Diploma to a Bachelor qualification while continuing to teach in their local villages. However, initial research identified several challenges that hindered this teacher upgrade programme, including issues related to the language of instruction, technology and pedagogy (Esera et al., 2019, Tuia, 2019). This article builds on this earlier research by examining students' pedagogical experiences within this ODL teacher upgrade programme. In particular, we question how this highly individualised and self-directed pedagogical platform is experienced in a culture underpinned by a 'deep and interwoven relationality' (Cobb et al., 2022, p. 122). Therefore, this research examines how culture mediates the pedagogical experiences of Samoan teacher education students learning through an ODL programme. Given the unprecedented global shift towards ODL due to the global pandemic, this article offers timely insights and important considerations for the international teacher education community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since it entered the educational landscape, ODL has fundamentally changed the fabric of tertiary education, creating new opportunities for students to participate in higher education. In its conception, ODL was developed to provide an alternative to mainstream education, presenting an opportunity for education to defy both architecture and geography by being 'opened' beyond the walls of a classroom and the physical limitations of specified time, space and place (Peters, 2008, 2009). ODL offers an alternative to face-to-face tertiary education by employing multiple media to facilitate two-way pedagogic interaction between learner and teacher despite physical and geographic separation, and separation between the learner and teacher (Commonwealth of Learning, 2015b). Put simply, ODL embraces digital technologies to enable learners to study despite physical and time separation.

ODL's ability to reach large numbers of students across vast geographical distances at relatively low cost has led to a surge of interest in ODL within higher education (Perraton, 2010; UNESCO, 2002). While initially perceived as the 'poor cousin' of face-to-face teaching (Perraton, 2010), enhanced technological infrastructure, increased accessibility to mobile devices, a coordinated policy architecture, and financial support from international agencies and philanthropic organisations have contributed to the explosion of interest, particularly in low-income countries (Commonwealth of Learning, 2012; Perraton, 2010; UNESCO, 2002). More recently, the global pandemic has accelerated the uptake of ODL worldwide, with countries rapidly pivoting their entire education systems towards online modalities due to nationwide lockdowns (UNICEF, 2020b). This 'pandemic pedagogy' has shifted the spotlight directly on ODL and has hastened educators and learners from all corners of the globe towards learning and teaching through ODL.

However, despite this accelerated interest, ODL has been plagued with access and quality issues, exacerbating the 'digital divide' between high and low-income countries (Chan Mow et al., 2017; Commonwealth Secretariat, 2017; UNICEF, 2020a). While significant improvements in technological infrastructure have been made since ODL was first introduced, these improvements have been uneven, with low-income countries, small island states and rural regions less likely to have consistent and reliable internet access (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2017; Nyerere et al., 2012). While such concerns were raised long before the global pandemic, these challenges have been further exacerbated through nationwide lockdowns (UNICEF,

2020a, 2020b). Alongside these technological woes, the quality of some ODL programmes has also been called into question, with these initiatives resembling little more than a resource repository rather than a pedagogically rich learning platform (Simpson, 2013a, 2013b). Others indicate that ODL requires learners to possess a high degree of academic literacy and technological capabilities to effectively access and engage with course content (Cobb, 2018), leading to high drop-out rates and poor learning acquisition among learners (Perraton, 2000, 2010; Simpson, 2013a).

### **Open distance learning: A question of culture**

While these challenges highlight the complexities of studying via ODL, they also raise questions about the cultural assumptions underpinning learning through online learning platforms. ODL is a highly individualistic learning platform where self-directed and independent learning is actively promoted and reinforced (Cobb, 2018; Simpson, 2013a, 2013b). Such practices closely align with Western pedagogical assumptions, where individualism is celebrated and socialised through the pedagogic relay of knowledge (Cobb, 2018). While forms of collaborative learning are present within online modalities through asynchronous online discussion forums and synchronous Zoom discussions, such modalities rely on internet access and good technological infrastructure—factors often lacking in remote, rural and hard-to-reach regions.

The heavy focus on individualism has raised concerns in collectivist cultures, such as in the Pacific, where learning is a collaborative, collective, dialogic and relational activity (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017). Some argue that digital technologies have changed how culture is produced, communicated and used (Costa & Murphy, 2015). Others have challenged the absence of cyberspace critique, particularly given the significance of relationality in collectivist cultures (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017). In Pacific cultures, relationships between educator and learner are vital to the learning process (Cobb et al., 2019). This relationality is conceptualised through the – a relational space that inhabits 'past, present and future interactions' (Tuia & Cobb, 2021, p. 6). This relational and spiritual connection to place, space and people draws together the 'multiple connections and relationships between/amongst/within/through/beyond various spaces' (Cobb et al., 2019, p. 2), including people, groups and/or entities. While unifying within collectivist cultures, this notion of the *vā* is often troubling to Western ontologies, methodologies and educational approaches, which tend to focus on individual ways of being, doing and knowledge construction (Reynolds, 2016, 2017). As *vā* focuses on the 'collective good' and seeks to understand 'collective ways of being, collective ways of doing, and collective ways of knowledge construction' (Tuia & Cobb, 2021, p. 25), this conflicts with the epistemological premise of ODL which situates learning on individual ways of being, individual ways of doing and individual ways of knowledge construction. Despite the significance of this 'me versus we' tension (Tuia & Cobb, 2021, p. 25), until now, little attention has been given to the cultural assumptions that underpin ODL and little research has examined how ODL is experienced in collectivist cultures.

### **Open distance learning in Samoa**

The tension between the epistemological assumptions underpinning ODL is significant, given the rapid acceleration of ODL programmes and initiatives throughout the Pacific. In recent years, teacher education programmes have looked to ODL to increase the number of qualified teachers in the remote, isolated and geographically diverse islands of the Pacific (Bossu, 2017; Commonwealth of Learning, 2015a; Kruse Va'ai, 2016). Samoa is one example of a Pacific

nation that has employed ODL to increase the number of qualified teachers through a teacher upgrade programme.

Samoa is a small island nation in the South Pacific consisting of two main islands, Upolu and Savai'i, with Savai'i being the less populous and more remote of the two islands. Classified as a low-middle-income country, its geographic positioning renders it particularly susceptible to the effects of climate change, with cyclones and floods becoming an increasing drain on economic resources and technological infrastructure (Cobb et al., 2022). Culturally, Samoa, like many Pacific nations, is underpinned by a “deep and interwoven relationality” (Cobb et al., 2022, p. 122). Family and village life in Samoa are deeply interconnected, despite a delineated social structure where chiefs play an important role in facilitating collaborative and collective decision-making (see Tuia & Cobb, 2021). It is, therefore, through the *va* that connections between land, families, and villages are nurtured.

In response to concerns about the quality of teaching and learning, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MESC) looked to ODL at the turn of the millennium to accelerate access to teacher education (Bossu, 2017; Kruse Va'ai, 2016; Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 2006). However, it was not until 2016, following a period of substantial advancement in Information and Communication Technologies, that ODL was officially implemented as a platform for teacher education. ODL has since been used to accelerate a teacher upgrade programme for in-service teachers living on the remote island of Savai'i (National University of Samoa, 2017). This programme enables teachers to complete two years of additional study to upgrade their Diploma of teaching to a Bachelor qualification while living in their remote villages and continuing to teach at their school of employment (Tuia, 2019). Employing a blended approach, this ODL programme incorporated block courses to offer students face-to-face learning experiences at the beginning and middle of the semester. An online learning programme throughout the remainder of the semester accompanied this.

Despite this programme providing access to teacher education, initial research by Esera et al. (2019) identified several challenges that have hindered the successful implementation of this teacher upgrade programme. Technology proved to be a significant challenge, with the lack of consistent and reliable internet access being compounded by students' limited technological capabilities. In addition, the programme was delivered in English, a second language for most students, which impacted students' ability to effectively understand programme content, reading materials and instructions. As well as the technical demands of the programme, students found it difficult to balance studying alongside their regular full-time teaching commitments and navigating the demands of family and village life. This situation led to teachers prioritising their studies over teaching preparation, leading to increased absenteeism. In the short term, the quality of teaching suffered as teachers navigated the complexities of studying through this ODL programme.

This initial research provides important insights into some key factors that have inhibited the successful implementation of ODL; however, further research is needed to understand students' pedagogical experiences of learning through ODL. Importantly, research is necessary to examine how students from collectivist cultures experience this highly individualised pedagogical programme. This research aimed to respond to this gap by understanding how culture mediates the pedagogical experiences of Samoan teacher education students.

## METHODOLOGY

Samoan *fa'afaletui* guided the research methodology (Tuia & Cobb, 2021) to examine the pedagogical experiences of 16 students completing their teacher upgrade programme through the National University of Samoa (NUS). *Fa'afaletui* is a traditional Samoan conversational practice that has been reconceptualised as a decolonial research methodology (Tuia & Cobb, 2021). As a methodology, *fa'afaletui* is a 'conversational forum designed for data generation of collective experiences, challenges and issues' (p. 21). *Fa'afaletui* methodology offers a collective and collaborative approach to knowledge generation that invites ideas, perspectives and opinions to be critically and respectfully debated until a collective consensus is obtained. By positioning participants as the co-constructors and co-authors of research findings, the *fa'afaletui* methodology aims to ensure that Samoan ways of being, knowing, learning and teaching are elevated throughout the research process.

We put the *fa'afaletui* methodology to work by inviting two cohorts of teacher education students to participate in this study. All students were teachers or principals upgrading their qualifications from a Diploma to a Bachelor while still completing their full-time teaching and/or principal requirements. All students were located in the remote Samoan island of Savai'i where there is limited technological infrastructure. Cohort 1 students were in the final semester of their two-year teacher upgrade program, and Cohort 3 students were in their first year of this program. Eight students from Cohort 1 and eight from Cohort 3 were randomly selected and invited to participate in this study. All 16 students agreed to participate. Ethical consent was obtained from the NUS and each participant before commencing the study.

We held an initial *fa'afaletui* with each cohort of students (Cohort 1 and Cohort 3) at the beginning of the university semester in February (two *fa'afaletui* in total). A second *fa'afaletui* was held at the conclusion of the semester in June with the same two cohorts of students (Cohort 1 and Cohort 3). It was important to hold a separate *fa'afaletui* with each cohort because students had experienced the ODL for varying lengths of time. The purpose of the first *fa'afaletui* was to listen to students' stories about their pedagogical experiences of learning through ODL. The collective storying provided an opportunity to weave together shared understandings and differing perspectives of their learning experiences and to understand to what extent culture mediated these pedagogical experiences. Following this *fa'afaletui*, a recording was transcribed and coded for analysis with pseudonyms used to protect the identity of the participants.

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify initial themes from the students' collective storying. The second *fa'afaletui* provided an opportunity for us to return and invite students into a conversation about our initial analysis and theorising. This was an important part of the *fa'afaletui* because much discussion and debate came from these emerging themes. Some initial themes were challenged and reconstructed, while others were affirmed (see Tuia & Cobb, 2021). Through this co-constructed analysis, each cohort of students wove their experiences and understanding into a collective knowledge frame about their pedagogical learning experiences through ODL. The Samoan *fale* house was used as a metaphor to depict these knowledge frames, with students contributing to identifying the *pou* poles of knowledge that 'held up' their pedagogical experiences in a cultural framework (Tuia & Cobb, 2021 for further details).

## FINDINGS

This section reports on the findings of this study, with a particular focus on students' pedagogical experiences of learning through ODL. We begin by identifying the factors that supported their learning before considering the factors that inhibited their learning in the ODL programme.

### **Pedagogical factors that supported students' learning through ODL**

Students identified several factors that supported their learning in an ODL environment. All factors centred on the notion of relationality, including relationality with other students, relationality with lecturers and maintaining their spiritual connectedness. The following sections report on the findings of this analysis.

#### **Relationality with other students**

Participants identified that building and maintaining relational connectedness with other ODL students was indispensable to their learning experience. Fellow students provided a helpful, encouraging and supportive community, which carried them through their often-isolating ODL experience. Students noted that opportunities to dialogue and collaborate with their peers strengthened their knowledge and understanding of course content. For example, Elisapeta noted:

[I]t is very important for me to learn from my peers, tutors and other friends. We share ideas and knowledge when we have our group work. (Elisapeta, Cohort 3 student)

The powerful learning that took place with other ODL peers was essential to their success. These collaborative opportunities occurred during the face-to-face component of the program, as well as through their own organisation of informal meetings and phone calls. Ionatana emphasised the significance of these relational experiences by noting:

[T]raining together with many other teachers and sharing ideas is crucial. (Ionatana, Cohort 3 student)

Sharing ideas and understandings with their peers via phone or face-to-face informal gatherings appeared to alleviate the stress and pressure of their studies while also creating a supportive and effective way to solve problems. Mareta further affirmed the educational value of this collaboration:

[T]hey [my peers] always encourage me to go on and on to pass my coursework. That is why I really love my cohort because we share a lot. I give thanks to them for helping me out. (Mareta, Cohort 1 student)

Natia, a fellow Cohort 1 student, further elaborated by saying that interacting with other students was:

[A] very good way for us to share the difficulties with our studies and our teachers' workload. (Natia, Cohort 1 student)

For many, this relationship with other ODL students was deep, with Timoteo describing it as a family:

[We are] a family, as sisters and brothers [that] work as a team [to] complete their ODL programme. [I] thank God for their teamwork. (Timoteo, Cohort 1 student)

Regular engagement and interaction between students, therefore, appeared to serve as a form of motivation and accountability. This collective support encouraged students to pass their courses and strive towards finishing the ODL program. Given the independent and self-directed nature of ODL, this finding is significant because it suggests that students actively seek relational connectedness to support their learning.

### **Relationality with lecturers**

Participants explained that their relationship with lecturers was an important part of their ODL learning. Maintaining relational connectedness by phone or email enabled them to clarify misconceptions and ask questions, which became crucial to their success. Cohort 3 student, Iakopu, described the relationship with her lecturer as meaningful and imperative to her success:

[T]hanks to our lecturer, our tutor, who is there to share and extend more knowledge about the different subjects. (Iakopu, Cohort 3 student)

Iakopu went on to describe this lecturer as someone who is 'friendly' and very 'encouraging', inspiring her to work hard on the course.

Similarly, Ionatana spoke of the learning gained from interactions with lecturers:

[T]here are so many new things that I have learnt while studying in the ODL programme. I have [learned] a lot of methods and ideas from lecturers, and I have been preparing myself for . . . new ideas for teaching. (Ionatana, Cohort 3 student)

As a student, this interaction with lecturers motivated Ionatana to work hard, understand course material and gain new ideas to implement in her classroom teaching.

Elisapeta affirmed the importance of their two face-to-face tutorials throughout the semester. She believed that she had:

[L]earnt [the] best from the tutors during the tutorials. (Elisapeta, Cohort 3 student)

These sentiments were shared by Natia, who determined that her success was because of the support and guidance from her lecturers:

I believe I can do this, and I believe that lecturers will show me all the things that will help me succeed. (Natia, Cohort 3 student)

These explanations suggest that students relied on the relational connectedness with their lecturers to gain additional clarification, assurance and encouragement. It was this personal support that was deemed essential for their own learning. Students relied on personal interaction, whether in face-to-face tutorials or phone calls, to support their understanding and motivate them towards course completion. This suggests that students may benefit more from a blended model of ODL, with blocks of face-to-face instruction rather than a purely online programme.

### **Spirituality**

Spirituality was another critical factor supporting students' ODL programme. For these students, their spiritual connectedness was crucial to their success, with their faith in God being a constant source of support and guidance. Cohort 1 student, Eseta Mikaele, explained this by saying:

We depend on God in everything that we want to do; we always pray [to] God to help us. We believed in praying, fasting and because I believe God has blessed my country and

myself. It also helped my work, my ODL. And I believe that God has blessed me by completing this course; I believe that God has done it for me. (Eseta Mikaele, Cohort 1 student)

Anela affirmed that prayer and faith were significant parts of her ODL journey as they gave her the strength and encouragement to complete the programme:

The foundation of our nation is founded on God, and we believe that whatever we do, we have to give it all to Him. He will help us with the work because I do believe in what my Bible says, if I read, if I do my assignments and pray He'll answer. It really encourages me to do the work. (Anela, Cohort 1 student)

Timoteo explained that his faith gave him motivation, perseverance and persistence to continue with his studies, despite encountering challenges and difficulties:

The Spirit encourages me to go forward, and don't give up. (Timoteo, Cohort 1 student)

Similarly, Mareta shared these sentiments, explaining:

I think spiritual[ity] is one of the most important part for every one of us during the ODL. I believe that spiritual[ity] help[ed] me a lot throughout the course. It strengthened me through the course when doing the assignments. (Mareta, Cohort 1 student)

These findings suggest that spirituality was a significant part of students' ODL journey. Their faith helped them overcome educational obstacles, persist in the face of difficulties and focus on completing their studies as an act of service to God. Given the individualised nature of the ODL programme, spiritual connectedness appeared to be a source of strength, motivation and comfort and was a key aspect of their academic survival. This finding is significant as it suggests that the importance of relationality extends beyond people and includes spiritual connection—a factor often overlooked when considering pedagogical design.

### **Challenges of learning through ODL**

Several experiences hampered students' abilities to learn through ODL. These factors include a lack of face-to-face time and English as the mode of instruction. These factors will be explored in greater depth in the sections that follow.

#### **Lack of face-to-face instruction**

Students reported difficulties engaging in course material because of the lack of face-to-face interactions with other students and lecturers. For instance, Cohort 1 student Eseta recommended:

[M]ore face-to-face lectures so that we can come and ask questions which is really needed for our research and assignments. (Eseta, Cohort 1 student)

Eseta indicated that she preferred to ask questions about assignments and course material in-person rather than via email because this strengthened her understanding of course requirements and content.

A similar sentiment was shared by Cohort 1 participant, Lasela, who pointed out:

We only have two face-to-face classes for two subjects in the past two years. It is our first time in the ODL programme, but we faced . . . challenges such as being an independent learner . . . we haven't done this before. (Lasela, Cohort 1 student)



For Lasela, this created 'learning problems' as she had not experienced learning independently. Lasela felt she needed greater relational support to participate in the ODL programme effectively.

Cohort 3 participant, Ionatana, agreed, noting that the course materials alone are not a sufficient replacement for dialogic interaction and communication:

We have our course reader, but we need help. (Ionatana, Cohort 3 student)

These findings suggest that students valued personal connection, collaboration and dialogic interactions to support their learning. ODL limited their ability to maintain sustained pedagogic interactions with their lecturers, challenging their ability to engage with course materials sufficiently.

### **Limited English capabilities**

Another significant pedagogical challenge that inhibited students' learning through ODL was the medium of instruction. The ODL programme was delivered in English rather than Samoan (their mother tongue), and students believed this hampered their learning. As previous research by Esera et al. (2019) identified, students' limited experience with academic English presented a problem for many students and was a key reason why students wanted more face-to-face engagement with their lecturer rather than relying on online platforms for meetings and classes. For example, Timoteo suggested that being able to share and discuss readings with lecturers and peers would help to enhance their comprehension of academic texts written in their second language:

[S]haring reading as well as searching the internet for help thus make a big difference with learning. (Timoteo, Cohort 1 student)

Others agreed, maintaining that collaborative reading activities would help to:

[S]hape up my reading and become a better reader. (Mareta Cohort 1 student)

This suggests that students valued collaborative and dialogic learning opportunities to help them make sense of academic tasks in their second language. The lack of interactive and dialogic opportunities was perceived to inhibit their comprehension of course materials and readings. These challenges highlighted the need for greater relational connectedness to support students' ODL learning.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings from this study highlight the strong educational value students place on relationality at all stages of their ODL programme. What is significant about these findings is that ODL is a highly individualistic learning platform where self-directed and independent learning is actively promoted and reinforced (Cobb, 2018; Simpson, 2013a, 2013b). Underpinned by Western pedagogical assumptions, ODL intentionally relaxes the space and pace of pedagogical transmission to socialise learners towards a more independent and self-directed learning framework (Cobb, 2018). However, the findings of this study suggest that the students struggled with this abrupt resocialisation of learning. ODL's drive towards independent learning presented a sharp disjuncture from the highly relational foundations of students' cultural, social and teaching life (Tuia, 2019). For these students, relationality and spirituality were identified as the main *pou* poles in their *fale* house, which enabled them to learn effectively. By overtly removing these *pou* poles from their learning experience, students exercised agency to re-establish relational connectedness throughout their ODL experience.

Informal conversations and phone calls with peers and lecturers appeared to bridge this relational vacuum and provide a supportive structure for students to learn while located at a distance. The face-to-face block courses provided a welcome opportunity for students to reconnect and strengthen their relationships physically. This suggests that a blended ODL program, where there are blocks of face-to-face interaction coupled with periods of distance learning, is crucial to the success of students' learning experiences.

The desire to locate learning within a relational space appeared consistent across the two cohorts of students, with Cohort 3 students desiring the same relational foundation for learning as Cohort 1 students, despite being at the conclusion of their two-year programme. While Cohort 3 students may have learned skills to support independent and self-directed learning, students still favoured dialogic and collaborative opportunities as the best way to support their learning trajectories. These findings challenge the assumption that students will 'grow into' ODL over time once they have acquired the skills of independent and self-directed learning. Instead, the findings of this study suggest the ODL may not serve the needs of all learners, despite being socialised into independence. ODL programmes may disadvantage students from collectivist cultures if they fail to sufficiently provide the type of rich learning experiences that students gain through relational connectedness and dialogic practices. Divorced of these opportunities, students may encounter an anaemic learning experience that neglects to sufficiently support and cater for their learning.

Bringing *va* into conversation with ODL pedagogy makes it easy to understand why students experienced tension and challenge as they navigated a pedagogical platform that 'pulls towards individualism and away from collectivism' (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017, p. 72). As noted earlier, *va* seeks to understand 'collective ways of being, collective ways of doing, and collective ways of knowledge construction' (Tuia & Cobb, 2021, p. 25). This conflicts with the epistemological premise of ODL, which orients learners towards individual ways of being, individual ways of doing and individual ways of knowledge construction. This epistemological tension was evident in the narratives of the 16 ODL students who wrestled with the disruption of this time-space connection. ODL created a relational separation between their fellow students and lecturers, making it difficult to nurture the *va* within this pedagogical knowledge exchange. The relaxed pace of pedagogic transmission and the removal of face-to-face instructional discourse disrupted the *va*. This absence made it difficult for students to experience rich engagement with course content because of the holistic and interconnected nature between relationality, spirituality and learning. Students sought to strengthen the *va* through phone calls and informal meetups to navigate this disruption. This repositioned learning away from the individual and back to the collective. This epistemological push and pull were experienced by students throughout their ODL programme, causing ongoing tension and challenge.

We conclude by making a case for the reconceptualisation of ODL better to reflect the relational nuances and specificities within collectivist cultures. The Western epistemological premise that underpins ODL needs to be questioned and reimagined so that cultural notions, such as the *va*, are nurtured through ODL programmes. Rather than striving to promote the individual and the independent, ODL could be reimagined to embrace the collective and the collaborative. The world has become more familiar with synchronous and asynchronous communicative modalities, which have the power to facilitate collective ways of knowing, being and behaving. While technological infrastructure and connectivity remain a barrier for many in geographically remote and rural localities, blended approaches offer an opportunity for ODL programmes to bridge this relational divide. Importantly, our conversations must look beyond immediate technological barriers and focus on reimagining a new epistemological and pedagogical premise for ODL. ODL can potentially create 'previously undreamed of opportunities for the

nurturing and maintenance of the Vā' (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017, p. 68). However, this begins by placing culture and context at the centre.

## CONCLUSION

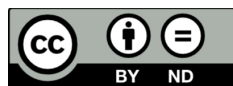
These findings challenge the assumption that ODL is a one-size-fits-all pedagogic platform that can be implemented irrespective of culture and context. While much research on ODL has fixated on issues of access, poor connectivity and inadequate technological infrastructure (Chan Mow et al., 2017; Tuia et al., 2019), this article highlights the need for researchers to pay greater attention to the epistemological assumptions that underpin ODL. While this article has shed light on how culture mediates Samoan students' experiences of ODL, there is an urgent need for further research in other non-Western cultures. Researchers are encouraged to examine how culture recontextualises the pedagogical transmission of knowledge in ODL programmes and how cultural practices, such as *va*, mediate how ODL is interpreted and experienced in other collectivist cultures. Such work is needed to challenge assumptions that ODL can be uniformly implemented irrespective of culture and context. In a time when the global pandemic has heightened and accelerated the uptake of ODL, the findings of this study offer important, timely and relevant considerations for policy, practice and future research.

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