

Scholarly Responses to ‘Students’ experiences of Open Distance Learning: A Samoan case study’

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The global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the disruption of in-person instruction for students worldwide. Betthäuser et al. (2023) termed this period ‘one of the largest disruptions to learning in history’ (p. 375). Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is an established educational approach that addresses the administrative and educational challenges commonly encountered in traditional face-to-face learning. By promoting self-directedness and flexibility in learning, ODL enables individuals to determine their own learning environment, including the location and timing of their educational pursuits. Nations within the Pacific region have seen significant advantages from ODL, primarily due to the region's abundance of islands and isolated places. These geographical characteristics pose considerable obstacles to conventional educational delivery approaches.

Tuia and Cobb conducted this significant study on the teacher education program in a geographically remote small island context (Tuia & Cobb, 2023). The research is a source of inspiration, highlighting the role of culture in shaping students’ pedagogical experiences in the Samoan ODL program. This study investigates the attitudes of teacher education participants in Samoa who completed a two-year teacher upgrading program delivered via ODL. The result of the study revealed the presence of relational connections and dialogic opportunities. Tuia and Cobb (2023) highlighted the inherent conflict of individualism as an epistemological premise of ODL and the collectivist cultures prevalent in the Pacific region. Learning in the Pacific is characterised by ‘a collaborative, collective, dialogic, and relational activity’ (p. 3). Tuia and Cobb added, ‘In Pacific culture, relationships between educator and learner are vital to the learning process’ (p. 3). The Samoan ODL program deliberated upon a blended approach that integrates block courses to address this apparent inconsistency. This approach facilitated in-person educational opportunities for teachers at the commencement and midpoint of the semester, then implemented an online component for the remainder of the semester.

Another advantage of this paper is the inclusion of *fa’afaletui*, a decolonial research methodology. Tuia and Cobb (2021) highlight that the concept of *fa’afaletui* has arisen because of an uncomfortable coupling with Western research approaches and methods. This technique described by Zhang et al. (2015) aligns with the concept of Asia as Method in education studies, which involves expanding frames of reference to enhance researchers’ subjectivity and worldviews. Zhang and Chan (2022) unpacked three major concepts of translation (Asia and West), base entity (cultural tradition), and inter-referencing (Asia and Asia). The *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* released a special edition entitled ‘Dialogues about the Local and the Global in Education’ in which Tuia (2018) published an article: *The of Samoan pre-service teacher education on student learning*. *Fa’afaletui* provides a framework for knowledge development that fosters a communal and collaborative environment. This method encourages exchanging ideas, views, and viewpoints, subject to critical analysis and polite discussion until a collective agreement is reached.

The article presented clear research about the links between students, lecturers, and spiritual connectivity. The ODL program also identified two problems: the absence of in-personal instructions and constraints in English proficiency. This research presents significant factors for the global teacher education community to consider.

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Fuaialii Associate Professor Dr Tagataese Tupu Tuia is well known amongst our OCIES colleagues as someone who has championed the importance of Samoan scholarship and Samoan concepts. This article is no different, building on the *fa'afaletui* methodology and offering insight into the value of relationality and relational engagement in informing the ODL curriculum. The tensions of which knowledge base to draw on continue when considering how to frame professional development in the region, with competing desires to recognise local knowledge and ways of doing, alongside the contribution that global knowledge and values can also bring. What is key in Tuia and Cobb's (2023) article is the acknowledgement of such tensions, and the benefits and options that borrowing from both knowledges can bring.

Tuia and Cobb (2023) speak of an epistemological tension between Samoan and Western educational values; they focus here on how the values often collide and intersect, resulting in

tensions. They describe how such tensions can be ameliorated through actively considering Samoan values, methods and pedagogies of being and doing in education. They usefully argue how pedagogical design for Online Distance Learning could learn much by engaging with *vā* (relational space) and *talanoa* (open discussion) as Samoan theories of relationality and relational engagement. Such an approach would ensure culturally rich and relevant learning experiences promoting relational connectedness and dialogic practices. This is a message that Tagataese has constantly reinforced across their academic research, one that aligns well with regional ocean-centred frameworks and research (for example, Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative for Pacific Peoples). Tagataese's academic contribution began by investigating the tensions that result from the nexus of traditional and colonial values in the Samoan education system. Their doctoral research used standpoint theory to foreground the Indigenous and argued for the need to incorporate traditional values alongside global values in the education system (Tuia, 2013). These themes continued with Tuia (2019) drawing on the work of Spivak, advancing the concept of hybridity as a way forward, a mixing pot of old and new, adapted for current times. Tuia and Iyer (2015) call for integrating Samoan culture into the globally oriented curriculum, creating enriched third-spaces and ensuring education generates relevant knowledge and skills for Samoans. Tuia (2018) argued that incorporating Samoan Indigenous knowledge and wisdom in teacher education programs could broaden Western ideas so that students can understand education from Indigenous and global perspectives. In Tuia et al. (2021), Tagataese brilliantly draws on the Samoan concept of *soalaupule* as a distinctively Samoan Indigenous method that encapsulates the hybridity and third space notions. Perhaps their strongest academic offering, *soalaupule* describes consultation of old and new ideas relevant to the new developments seen as beneficial to the future of a nation. The theoretical refinement of *soalaupule* is evident in Tuia and Cobb (2023), strengthening this useful conceptualisation of how different knowledges can work together.

‘Ese, we will miss you, your contributions, your stories and your humour, and particularly your ongoing enthusiasm and passion for things to be done right! *E lē toe galo oe. ‘Ofa lahi ‘atu.*

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The paper by Tuia and Cobb (2023, this edition) contributes important evidence of the impact of globally available virtual education learning platforms such as Open Distance Learning (ODL) on local teaching and learning practices. Considered by most international organisations, for example, UNESCO, national governments (in this case, Samoa) and education services providers as a utilitarian 'good' enabling more democratic access to higher education, few researchers have grappled with how these packaged learning platforms influence and are in turn influenced by their use in particular geographical locations.

Tuia and Cobb's paper presents a synthesis of the implications of the use of ODL in the Samoan context, implemented to address the requirement of the modern Samoan teacher education system across geographically disparate locations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, student agency came to the fore, where despite the potential anomie created by the ODL environment, students actively sought to create learning communities that mirrored their cultural expectations of what teaching and learning 'should' be. Teacher educators also found ways to circumvent the potential for learner estrangement by adapting elements of the ODL system to respond better to more traditional Samoan teaching methods.

Such findings strongly resonate with my research over the last 30 years (Diamond, 2021), where I have been charting the cross-cultural implications of the development of the modern university and its capacity to engage with local knowledge and wisdom. Throughout the analysis, I find that one constraint of scaling universities into the now global model is their race towards industrialisation, colonisation and neo-liberalism within the scientific paradigm. Examining the practices of teaching and learning in human societies, there are clear implications for teaching and learning depending on what modality is being used: Oral, Written, Printed, and now in the world of Virtual teaching and learning.

Tuia and Cobb's paper reminds us that the most constant method of transmission of knowledge is oral. This shines through their paper. We teach and learn in dialogical exchange. These exchanges are deeply culturally embedded. The modalities of writing and printing introduced new methods, successfully spreading the colonial project across the globe and consolidating the colonial mindset in education systems.

The implications of the impact of the virtual world are less clear. Tuia and Cobb's paper cautions us about the potential pitfalls of using ODL. They also invites us to consider what we know about time-honoured pedagogies for teaching and learning, their current constraints, and their future opportunities in the Samoan university system as it moves into the new postmodern, planetary, virtual education era.

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Tuia and Cobb conducted empirical research regarding open distance learning (ODL) and its implications for teacher education on Samoa's two most populous islands, Upolu and Savai'i. ODL is a platform for education that relies heavily on English literature and proficiency with information and communication technologies. Inadequate internet accessibility limited teacher-student technological and language skills, and difficulties juggling full-time work and family responsibilities surfaced as obstacles during the implementation process. The findings of this study indicate that students valued and maintained relational connections, which has global implications for teacher education.

This study by Tuia and Cobb has highlighted the significance of relationships in learning, particularly in the context of the accelerated rise of ODL during the COVID-19 pandemic. The worldwide transition to digital tools and online education has created new educational challenges. In this context, interpersonal connections become especially significant. Tuia and Cobb's research is crucial because it provides insight into how teacher students react to online education in the face of cultural, linguistic, and infrastructure-related barriers. Despite numerous obstacles, the study's findings are encouraging. Participants in Tuia and Cobb's study revealed that establishing and maintaining connections with ODL colleagues fostered a community of support, which ultimately contributed to a more successful learning outcome. Indeed, connections with others will not only foster a sense of belonging and community, benefiting emotional well-being by reducing feelings of isolation associated with an online context, but they will also facilitate the exchange of ideas, encourage creative problem-solving, promote the reception of constructive feedback, and promote reflective discussions among peers and educators. Evidently, the Samoan case demonstrated that relationality with students and instructors was crucial in facilitating learning in an ODL environment.

This active engagement with peers in the online learning environment was crucial to academic success because it encouraged teacher students to assume responsibility for their learning. This participation also prepares future teachers for work environments where virtual collaboration is prevalent. The experience obtained through online learning will equip these teacher students with proficiency and skills such as virtual classrooms and other digital resources, thereby enhancing their professional development and educational capacities.

Tuia and Cobb's study also incorporated *fa'afaletui*, a traditional Samoan research methodology that embraces a collective and collaborative approach to knowledge production. Adopting this localised collective approach is consistent with the specific Samoan community's cultural,

social and historical context, providing deeper insights and a more nuanced comprehension of how the data was collected and analysed in a collective setting. The Samoan method of co-constructing thematic analysis permits the identification of distinct patterns, relationships and dynamics. Tuia and Cobb's research has contributed to the body of knowledge by enhancing conversational comprehension of how Western individualised learning tools operate in a remote collectivist learning context. This contributes to the formation of new perspectives and insights, which enrich the broader field of pedagogical research.

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All too often academic delivery privileges the globally dominant Eurowestern paradigms and individualism in learning. This research by Tuia and Cobb (2023) provides important insights into students' experiences with Open Distance Learning (ODL) and the necessity of contextualising pedagogy to maximise student learning outcomes and recognise epistemic and ontological plurality. Initially, the goals of ODL in Samoa were to increase access to tertiary education substantially, upskill practising teachers and, later, as a quick pivot response to the global pandemic. However, the pedagogical design of ODL cannot be uniformly implemented cross-contextually without culturally responsive interventions; as Tuia and Cobb (2023) state, 'ODL intentionally relaxes the space and pace of pedagogical transmission' (p. 10). In relationally dependent cultures, such as in Samoa, it is imperative to integrate relational spaces in the curricular delivery. As Matapo and McFall-McCaffery (2022) described, 'The notion of self within a Pacific perspective takes on a vastly different etymology from that of neoliberal notions. The liberal individual holds their sense of autonomy based upon their capacity to reason and rationalise personal choice over a collective ethos of agency' (p. 129). As noted by Tuia, Cobb and research participants, the collective nature of knowledge constructions and sharing in Moana Oceania directly confronts these notions. Therefore, curricular designers must contextualise the knowledge ecology.

Not to go unrecognised in this response is the authors' demonstration of culturally responsive research methodology. The choice to utilise *fa'afaletui* further demonstrates the power of place-based contextualisation in facilitating relational spaces in the research process, whether for knowledge co-creation, sensemaking and for student learning. Fasavalu and Reynolds (2019) discuss how relational approaches facilitate learning opportunities where 'relational obligations and expectations [are] opportunities for researchers to seek agency, particularly over their development and research contribution' (p. 12). Relationality is negotiated over time and space (*vā*) with the utilisation of indigenous methods such as *talanoa* (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012; Vaioleti, 2006) and *tok stori* (Sanga et al., 2018; Sanga & Reynolds, 2021) and employing ethics familiar and reflective of the cultural contexts (Anae, 2016; Sanga & Reynolds, 2022).

Research participants validated the relationality imperative to their knowledge acquisition through the collective actions of sensemaking during the ODL courses and within this research through *vā talanoa*. Matapo and McFall-McCaffery (2022) support this premise, 'Pacific indigenous epistemologies constitute relational ties (*vā*) between collective knowledges. As a result, it is a challenge for Pasifika to negotiate knowledge constructs within the individualised,

competitive or property-owning academy’ (p. 128). As noted by authors Tuia and Cobb, the mediation of culture ‘recontextualises’ the curriculum, creating a sense of collectiveness that is more familiar and additional opportunities for learners to receive validation through the collective sensemaking processes.

This contribution adds to the growing scholarship of Oceania's comparative and international education. Tuia and Cobb (2023) discuss how critically important it is to ‘locate learning within a relational space’ (p. 11). This is foundational to the collective success of educational facilitators and learners in knowledge ecologies that are grounded in relationality. In summary, ODL can be an important tool to increase access and the number of teachers, but it needs to be contextually adapted, not just by the learners but also by curricular designers. I would encourage further research exploring ODL from the curricular designer perspective in Samoa and similar environments to explore how such models can appropriately respond to contexts.

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In the wake of the passing of the esteemed author, it is with great reverence that I engage in this scholarly response to Tuia and Cobb's article titled 'Students' experiences of Open Distance Learning: A Samoan case study' (2023, this edition).

It is important to acknowledge the impact this research has had on understanding Open Distance Learning (ODL) and its implications for collectivist cultures. The rise of ODL has indeed opened up new horizons in education, particularly for geographically remote regions and small islands like Samoa. As the world grapples with the implications of the global pandemic, the need for effective ODL methods has become more pronounced than ever. The findings of Tuia and Cobb's study are timely and immensely relevant in today's educational landscape.

Tuia and Cobb's paper provided a window into the significance of relationality for these students, who actively sought out ways to maintain connections with peers and lecturers despite the inherent nature of ODL being less conducive to such interactions (2023, this edition). The findings provide valuable insights that challenge the assumption that independent and self-directed learning are solely effective in ODL environments. As an Australian school teacher who taught remote learning and online classes throughout the pandemic and lockdowns in Melbourne, I can certainly relate to the insights provided in the paper.

Another noteworthy finding of the study is the emphasis on relationality among students. Tuia and Cobb's insights into the significance of relationality and dialogic interactions in the context of ODL take on a new dimension. The article convincingly argues that relational connections are essential to the student's learning journey, even in an ODL context that offers limited opportunities for such interactions. The study highlights the value of fostering connections and relationships among students, which resonates deeply with my own teaching experiences in the classroom. Incorporating the lessons from this paper into my teaching practices encourages me to create opportunities for students to connect, collaborate and engage in meaningful discussions. It reaffirms the idea that education is not just about disseminating information but also about nurturing relationships, understanding cultural contexts and recognising the significance of interconnectedness.

Furthermore, Tuia and Cobb's paper underscores the significance of cultural practices and interconnected relationality in learning environments. This correlates with our recent research on the Australian Curriculum Cross-curriculum priority-Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia (Zhang et al., 2023). Just as the students in Samoa valued relational connections to enhance their learning in an ODL context, fostering connections and understanding cultural perspectives are fundamental aspects of the Australian Curriculum Cross-curriculum priority-Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia (Zhang et al., 2020). The article's conclusion prompts a reflection on the essential role that relational connections play in pursuing meaningful and effective education, particularly in collectivist cultures.

As the educational landscape leans further into digital realms, the lessons drawn from this article are invaluable for educators. With admiration and gratitude, I appreciate Tuia and Cobb's valuable contributions to education and global discussions on ODL.

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