



Transcript

Series two, episode two: Skills for the future

Dr Shikha Raturi:

If a teacher is innovative, they will embrace technology to enhance their teaching and the higher education institutions should provide support and space for this to happen.

Natasha Lokhun:

The great online pivot presents the higher education sector with a new set of opportunities and challenges. How can universities ensure their courses are fit for purpose? What skills do teachers and students need, and how do they keep up with technological change? Technology can help deliver lessons in new ways, but it also creates issues.

Dr Tammy Tabe:

Poor connectivity is not only challenging in terms of the students accessing the course, but also in terms of delivering the course more creatively.

Natasha Lokhun:

So, what can universities do to support their staff and students?

Professor Sue Bennett:

There are two aspects to it, and one is about providing the resources. A great technology platform with really good tools. And then there's the support component that sits alongside of that.

Natasha Lokhun:

In the previous episode, we heard about some of the big issues that impact on the use of technology in higher education. In this episode, we'll focus on one of them in particular; what skills do staff and students need for the future, and how can universities best prepare their teachers and their learners?

I'm Natasha Lokhun, welcome to the Internationalist podcast from the Association of Commonwealth Universities. My guests are Dr. Shikha Raturi, Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, and Professor Sue Bennett, Head of the School of Education at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, Australia. But first of all, we'll hear from Dr. Tammy Tabe. Dr. Tabe is also a lecturer at the University of the South Pacific. We asked her to tell us about the training she's received for teaching online and the challenges she faces.

Dr Tammy Tabe:

The postgraduate certificate in tertiary teaching was very helpful in making me understand how to better effectively deliver the course that I'm teaching online. Poor connectivity is not only a challenge in terms of students accessing the course, but also in terms of delivering the course more creatively.

Interaction virtually is also a challenge for online teaching because students don't interact equally in the course. However, because the course it's taught online, it's inclusive and far-reaching, and so we have students across the region in isolated communities and countries that do not need to come to the main campus in Fiji to take on the course.

Natasha Lokhun:

So although online teaching allows students from remote areas the opportunity to study without having to travel to the campus, poor connectivity does create challenges. My first guest, Dr. Shikha Raturi from the University of the South Pacific has many years of experience in training lecturers how to teach effectively online. She's the program coordinator for the postgraduate certificate in tertiary teaching and e-learning, and the co-manager of the teacher's educational resource and e-learning center at the university's main campus in Fiji. I asked Dr. Raturi to tell me about the University of the South Pacific and the area it covers.

Dr Shikha Raturi:

The University of the South Pacific is a regional university owned by its 12 member countries; Cook islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Samoa. And these are spread over 33 million square kilometers in the Pacific. The university has 14 campuses, one in each member countries, while there are three in Fiji. And in addition to these, we also have centers that offer students assistance. USP started with distance education in the seventies with the print-based distance education courses, making use of satellite tutorials. And since then USP has been working on improving its ICT infrastructure incrementally.

Natasha Lokhun:

So you've built up years of experience in using technology at USP. When a lecturer comes to your class to learn, where do you start?

Dr Shikha Raturi:

They begin with the basics of learning and teaching, right from the theories and writing smart learning outcomes, to designing teaching and learning activities and assessments with and without technology, because we are preparing them for both face-to-face as well as online learning environments.

We emphasize on the use of appropriate technology, given the social, economically, culturally and geographically diverse background our students come from. So we provide our cohort a space to explore and discover tools and technologies relevant to their needs with respect to a particular course that they're teaching, make a video of their findings and then share with their peers and provide comments to each other.

Then another thing that we do is providing them a taste of open educational resources. We also introduce them to emerging trends and some of these which I can also see in use in near future, a virtual reality and augmented reality. Another one is learning analytics, and they actually demonstrate this one in the course in two assignments that they do. They also do a research study-based assessment, where they focused on one area of e-learning with the intention to find a technological solution to a learning and teaching issue.

Natasha Lokhun:

We heard earlier about the challenges of being creative in lessons when you're dealing with poor connectivity, what skills can lecturers develop to deal with that specific issue?

Dr Shikha Raturi:

Getting them all in a real time scenario may be difficult, so thinking about asynchronous activities, which can work out better, provided the students have fully understood why you want them to engage in a certain asynchronous activity. For instance, the discussion forum. So we need to ensure that the students understand why they are doing what they are doing, and if they can understand that, they will do it. That has been at least my experience in the last 10 years. And mind you, I too have learned a lot as I went along and I continue to learn.

So while our CCD program provides learners these skills, we also have our Center for Flexible Learning that runs workshops for these academics so that they can learn about different learning technologies. Last year, during the pandemic lockdown, we had CFL team offering workshops on

how to use Zoom. And we know Zoom is a robust system and works well even in low bandwidth areas, something which is useful in many parts of the world, be it global north or south.

Natasha Lokhun:

So how can lecturers deal with the fact that students don't necessarily interact equally when it comes to online teaching? What advice could you give them?

Dr Shikha Raturi:

Right. So this is tricky, as it can be due to many reasons. The extent of access to computing device and internet, cultural background of the students, the facilitation style of the instructor, or even the clear guidelines on interaction.

So for example, we see that students can work well in group, and if we can let them select the group, but also ensure that there is some diversity in all senses, then we will see interaction will grow exponentially. Again, through experience, even if my students were not your typical students, as they are university academics, we see that the dynamics of the group helps with interaction, rules that are laid in the beginning so everyone owns up and looks out for their group members, ensuring that everybody is interacting. And if someone is quiet, the group members would go and find out what is the matter with them. So these are some of the things that we try and embed in our communication in the very beginning of the course, that when you are in a group, you're all really looking after each other.

Natasha Lokhun:

You've undertaken research with students at USP on different learning environments. What did the outcomes show?

Dr Shikha Raturi:

So the main message first of all from a large research study that was on learning environments, is that any student's personal learning environment is influenced by a number of factors, such as interaction. And these would be all kinds of interaction, whether it is peer-to-peer, peer-to-instructor, learner-to-content, or learner-to-interface. So all of those, then how is autonomy being addressed? How are you ensuring the students can be autonomous? Then another thing is course structure, how the course is designed. That also has a very important role to play. Then culture, language, ICT skills, and experience.

Dr Shikha Raturi:

And one very interesting one was wait time. So we see that in face-to-face learning, many colleagues comment on how students do not talk, and I think it is not really a problem in this part of the world, but a global issue. And interestingly enough, when these students go behind the computer, many said they felt comfortable because it gave them the waiting time and nobody was watching them.

Whereas in the traditional classroom, the professor may ask a question and within a few seconds or minutes, move on to the next one. And in our context for some of these students, English is not only second, but for some, it may be third or even fourth language, so they need time to respond, to construct that response. And in some cases they may be shy. That is some degree of cultural factor as it was shared by some of the participants in that research. So they feel they do not have enough time to respond, whereas a tool such as a discussion forum seems to provide them waiting time to respond and interact with others.

And I would think this would be true in majority of the university these days, because we know there is a great deal of international student population in different courses around the world.

Natasha Lokhun:

As one of two regional universities in the world, USP is pretty unique in its approach. What do you think universities in other regions and countries can learn from USP? And what do you think the implications are of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, generally globally?

Dr Shikha Raturi:

First of all, every higher education provider needs to understand the importance of support units and their collaboration with academy disciplines, such as what we have here is center for flexible learning. Then we have a student learning support. Then we have information technology services. Then we have library services. Then we have disability center, which actually is very useful for our students with special needs. So because we have this structure in place since many, many years, USP had fewer challenges moving courses online during the pandemic.

So one of my messages to exercise empathy and flexibility more in an online learning environment, and more so during this crisis that is the pandemic, because we do not know what situation our students are in so we need to tread carefully, providing all the support that we can through various avenues. And each course in this university is assigned an educational technologist and instructional designer who work with individual course coordinators to design their course for different learning environments.

Another point that I would like to make, which often gets overlooked, is that academics also get stressed. And when they are thrown out to try new things all of a sudden, higher education institutions need to ensure that one, there is a support system around academics too, and they as well need to exercise empathy and flexibility as the academics do within the students. And the second one is that continuous professional developments are crucial. And so this needs to be there in any university's strategic plan, such that up-skilling of their teaching professionals, their whole teaching team, not just academics, but also the instructional designers, educational technologist, the learning management systems teams, everybody who's involved in this game of putting things together for our students. So this should happen continuously.

And finally, we should understand that technology is here to stay, but technology will not replace teachers. And if a teacher is innovative, they will embrace technology to enhance their teaching. And the higher education institutions should provide necessary support and space for this to happen.

Natasha Lokhun:

In Dr. Raturi's experience, the success of online learning depends on strong support networks being in place for both staff and students. My next guest, Professor Sue Bennett from the University of Wollongong was an early adopter of online technologies in teaching and learning. She's been involved in policy development and the selection of systems and tools at an institutional level. And as head of the school of education, she motivates her colleagues and builds capacity for the effective use of technology. Professor Bennet has been both a learner and a teacher online, and I asked her how her experiences have influenced her leadership role.

Professor Sue Bennett:

One of the things that strikes me is there's often quite a deficit view of our teachers when there's leadership discussions about technology. So I've heard many, many times it observed that our staff are resistant or recalcitrant or just uninterested or unable to grasp the new technologies. And given that I've spent a long time, both as someone coming to grips with the technologies myself but working with a group of colleagues, I'm actually a bit more sympathetic to their view. And that's where I come from when I'm thinking about how do we encourage more adoption of technology. And I think the students side, I think it's worth all of us who are teaching to experience being an online student, because only then can we really understand all of the challenges in navigating, motivating, engaging. And that really helps us think about what our students need and what that variation is of what students need as well.

Natasha Lokhun:

And I think it's fair to say, just building on your point about, I suppose this deficit view of teachers, there can be an assumption, and I think you've really seen it emerge during the pandemic and the great online pivot, that students are digital natives and they're better placed than their older lecturers when it comes to adapting to technology, and there is this gap, I guess. But your research found that it's not as clear cut as that. Can you tell us a bit more about your findings?

Professor Sue Bennett:

Yeah. So from the student perspective, there's now quite a large body of research built up over a sustained period of time to show that young people are quite diverse in their knowledge, skills and dispositions with technology generally. So they're not a homogenous group. So this idea of digital natives is really stereotyping young people in a particular way that I think is really unhelpful.

The other thing that we've found from research is that it's actually quite challenging to transfer everyday technology experiences, social media, online shopping, all of those things that we do browsing information online, to the kinds of skills that you need to be successful as an online student. So we might think about academic digital literacy as being a very particular strand. So what do you need to build expertise in as a student online? And that's using all those resources in a particular way to support your studies.

And that includes as well, managing yourself online, self-regulating. Also building your skills in those particular uses of the technology, like searching the library catalog, but also critically reading the literature and then producing creatively some form of technology-based output from your work. So it is quite complex, and many of those are the things that we find we really need to assist students with that transfer if we can, but also building a whole new set of skills to help them with their learning.

Staff on the other hand, and particularly university staff, they are often already really quite expert with technology, particularly in their research, but in teaching, they haven't been given a compelling argument for changing the way that they teach and building in more technology. So what we've found in our various studies following our colleagues is that they actually have these great skills, but they're not even necessarily using them to the greatest extent during their teaching. So it's really about the fit with their teaching practices. And sometimes it's about their teaching beliefs. It's about feeling that technology doesn't really replicate enough of that really interactive process of teaching and that it's sort of unsatisfying those kinds of technology mediated interactions. I think it presents a really complex picture of both students and staff.

Natasha Lokhun:

Reflecting on the first half of this episode, Dr. Raturi from the University of South Pacific, she said that technology won't replace teachers, but that universities do have to give staff the means to learn new skills. Can you tell us a little bit about the University of Wollongong's approach to it?

Professor Sue Bennett:

There are two aspects to it. And one is about providing the resources that staff can engage with. So a great technology platform with really good tools, and tools that work together and have been chosen and tested really well with experienced teaching staff before they're put together. So that's one thing. And then there's the support component that sits alongside of that. And that can include obviously that support from central units, and we did hear about some models for that kind of support, but it also includes support locally, and opportunities to engage and immediately apply. So putting that into practice straight away. So we know that one of the things in all professional learning that is not particularly successful is when you go to a course and you learn how to do something, and then you come back to your job and if you don't have to immediately apply it, then it's likely just to stay in your head and not be put into practice.

The other piece of the puzzle is also the incentives. So we talked about before about what motivates teachers to adopt technologies in their teaching. And part of one of the things that we have is a framework, an academic performance framework that rewards teaching to begin with as

well as research. And it really encourages the kind of teaching that is building innovation and excellent practice, that also shares it with others. And that it's about developing as a teacher, building your own repertoire, but also sharing that practice with the people around you and maybe with people in other parts of the university. So a big piece is culture, and you can do that through policy, but you can also do that through sets of initiatives.

Natasha Lokhun:

Dr. Raturi was also talking about how, because of USP and their experience in distance and online education, they were better prepared for the pandemic. Does this resonate with the experience at Wollongong as well?

Professor Sue Bennett:

It does. And I'll say that we're not quite as dispersed as USP, but we do have multiple campuses and we have quite a long history of developing expertise in technology enabled learning. What that enabled us to do is to quickly pull that expertise and to draw on it to support each other. So in that time where we were rapidly shifting to that crisis remote teaching approach, that is something that we did across the university. So it happened locally, it happened within my school. We got people together in small teams where we made sure that we had people who were matched up so that there were people with varying levels of technical skill and also knowledge about online pedagogy to work together and support each other.

But then also at the faculty level, we had, again, a level of support that we could tap into looking for specific answers to questions. And then at the central level, there was a central team who were making available a whole lot of drop-in training sessions. So there was a huge rallying around of all of this expertise and sharing across the institution so that we could make that happen.

Natasha Lokhun:

Thinking about the long term. And I guess beyond what has been a particular kind of crisis period really in terms of pandemic, how do you think we can create the best conditions for, and I'll use your term, academic digital literacy?

Professor Sue Bennett:

I think one of the things that I would really love to see as a development out of this is a different way of designing educational technologies. So often what we get in education is something that's been given to us. Sometimes it's a tool that has been developed which has nothing to do with education at all. It might come from the business sector, it might come from the domestic technology sector, and we adopt it and we wrangle with it to make it work in education. And there's not really a conversation between the creators of the technology and the people who need to use it, which is our teachers and students. So my utopian future world is where actually we get all of those people together and we think what technologies do we need to support better teaching learning.

In reality, that may not happen. But I think first of all we need a positive approach that sees our teaching staff as experts and that we're building their expertise, and that we see our students as having a whole set of skills and capacities they bring, and we're building that. So that's taking a positive view. Work we've done points to the fact that you need a real variety of supports. So particularly for staff at various stages of their careers, they need different things. So sometimes they need one-on-one support. Sometimes they need a course. Sometimes they need a group of near colleagues to help. And near colleagues are very much strong influences on people taking up technologies. So approaches that seek to build cultures where you're supporting a whole group of people to move ahead with their technology adoption can be really successful.

And I think the final thing is really giving a lot of permission, is saying, particularly to our teachers, that you've got some agency in this and it's okay to not get it quite right, but that you can change and adapt and improve based on feedback, so that we're not setting up a culture where people

are afraid to try something new because they think there'll be penalized, or it will work against them, or they'll get poor student satisfaction or they're going to get in to trouble for something.

And maybe that is one of the things that's come out of this recent crisis experience, is that we didn't have time to think that we might fail. We had to get in and do it. And when things didn't work out, we learned things along the way and we adapted them really quickly. And often that was in response to very clear student feedback, and that can range from students complaining or students praising or students not showing up. I think it caused us to look very much in real time at our practice and think, what can we be doing better?

Natasha Lokhun:

Thanks to the great online pivot, there is a lot of valuable experience to draw on moving forwards. In the post pandemic future, it's likely that universities will have to make more changes in practice, but what's clear from our guests is that teachers and students must be given the support and space to develop and learn new skills. I'd like to thank Dr. Tammy Tabe and Dr. Shikha Raturi from the University of the South Pacific, and Professor Sue Bennett from the University of Wollongong. The Association of Commonwealth Universities is committed to highlighting the issues that influence learning and teaching in our world.

In the next edition, we'll be looking at inclusion and equality. Does online learning widen access to higher education, or does it accentuate the digital divide? So please do subscribe to the series wherever you get your podcasts, and like, comment, and share the program. You can find us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, just search for the Association of Commonwealth University. The Internationalist is presented by me, Natasha Lokhun, and produced by Gill Davis. It's an Earshot Strategies production for the Association of Commonwealth Universities.