

## **Semester Zero: An innovative orientation and nurturing program**

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### **Abstract**

The current Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected many universities' orientation as well as study programs. While some are still contemplating whether to open their doors for F2F studies, others face the challenge of fewer students enrolling due to travel restrictions. The University of the South Pacific (USP) will face a different kind of challenge. USP is a regional university co-owned by twelve South Pacific countries. Campuses and sub-campuses are situated in all these countries. Usually, orientation programmes are held at all campuses, but the majority of students travel early to USP's main campus in Fiji for the orientation program. Due to COVID-19, students' travel will be restricted, and the orientation programme will be a very small-scale event this year. Additionally, due to delays in Year 13 external examinations for one of its member countries (Fiji), USP will be forced to begin Semester One later. This means more than 3000 provisional students will have to wait for the university to begin in late March instead of the usual mid-February start. To keep these potential students engaged for close to two months, USP initiated an online orientation programme called "Semester Zero." The aim of the programme is to introduce these potential new students to USP using a Moodle platform instead of a traditional F2F orientation program, while at the same time incorporating basic numeracy, literacy, and digital skills necessary for new students.

This paper shares the planning, designing, and feedback from students about this program. Semester Zero employs technology and innovations that have a low carbon footprint.

### **Introduction**

COVID-19 brought major challenges to all sectors in countries worldwide. In the education sector, the sudden lockdowns, imposition of travel restrictions, social distancing and curfews brought to the forefront the need to change the way teaching and learning is conducted at many institutions. Overnight, counter decisions had to be made on how the course content was designed and approaches taken in its delivery had to be reexamined. Many things that were taken for granted suddenly needed to be halted or alternate options sorted in the education sector.

For a regional university like USP, it has become a bigger challenge given that the university campuses are scattered all over the region and the staff and students usually travel to teach and study at any of its campuses.

The early 2020 COVID-19 outbreak had a limited impact in the South Pacific region. According to the data compiled by John Hopkins University (see Figure 1 below), out of the twelve countries listed without any cases of COVID-19, ten were in the South Pacific region. The short span of lockdown in Fiji (where the main campus of USP is situated) has given the university the opportunity to use Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) as a means to continue teaching at the university. By the end of 2020, USP had reviewed the manner in which the courses were offered and was thus able to offer courses without any hindrance when a longer and more drastic lockdown occurred in 2021.

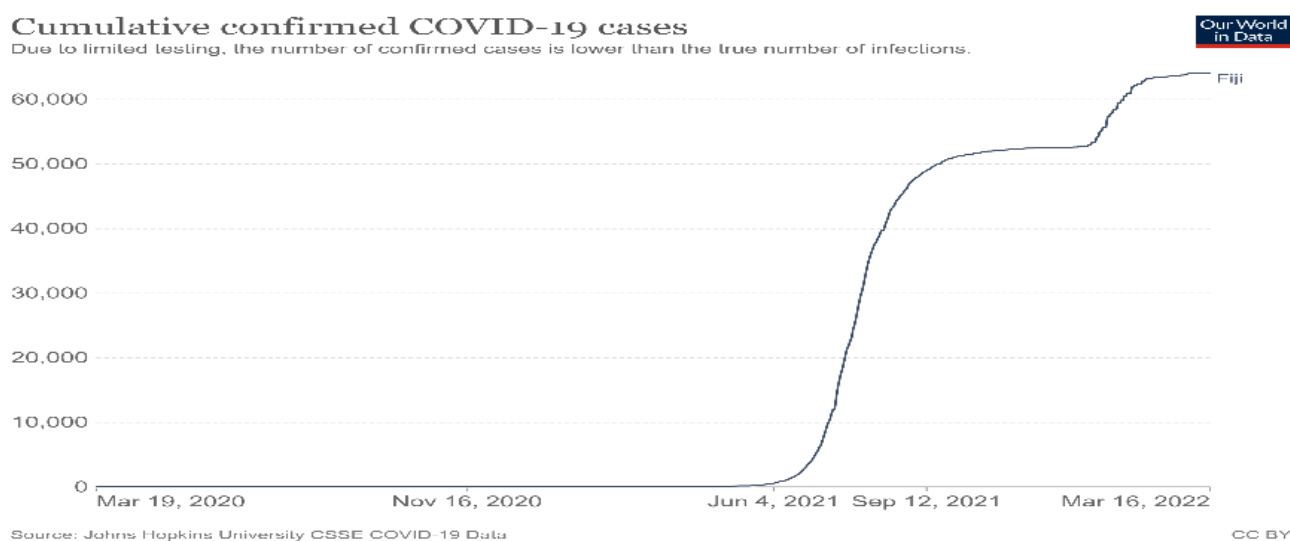
The greater challenge at hand for USP was related to the orientation or nurturing programme for new students planning to come for their studies in 2022.

The following paper discusses the challenges to the education sector that COVID-19 brought to the South Pacific region in 2021-22, the geographical landscape of USP, and the planning and offering of the online orientation, nurturing, and skill development programmes offered at USP.

### **COVID-19 and the South Pacific Region**

Unlike the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, 2021's Delta variant meant that the South Pacific region (and especially Fiji) had to impose stricter measures where movement and travel were concerned. While there were only five recorded cases of COVID-19 at the end of March 2020, by the end of March 2021 there were 67 recorded cases and 2 deaths due to the Delta variant. By mid-April 2021, Fiji had to impose strict travel restrictions; close its borders to all air and

sea travel, and establish confinement areas to further reduce the movement of people and goods. Such a snap imposition of curfews and confinement zones meant that all schools and non-essential businesses were brought to a complete halt. The closure of schools and universities meant that USP too had to switch back to an online study mode for the semester.



**Figure 1: Covid-19 cases in Fiji March 2022**

### USP's landscape

What makes USP stand out, as a unique university is its location, diversity, as well as the capability to offer courses across five time zones, 33 million square kilometers, and by any mode appropriate for any student based in any of the countries that own the university. USP is one of only two such regional universities in the world. It is governed by a group of 12 Pacific countries: the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall-Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. With campuses and sub-campuses in all the 12 countries, courses are offered F2F at the larger campuses: Laucala in Fiji, Emalus in Vanuatu and Alafua in Samoa. Other modes of delivery of courses include traditional print mode, blended, online and flexi schools. Students in any of the countries can enrol for courses offered by other modes, but for F2F courses they need to travel to any one of the 3 large campuses. Most regional students travel to the Laucala campus for their studies since this is where most courses are offered F2F and where they can find the largest library, science laboratories, computer labs, and student accommodation. Thus, at the beginning of the year, Laucala campus is full of activities with nurturing programmes to assimilate the new learners into the tertiary learning environment.

### Orientation and Skills Development Program

Normally, a F2F orientation or nurturing programme is seen as the norm for most universities. New students are either slotted into discipline-specific or generic orientation programmes during the early stages of their university life. In the past, USP used to conduct an Academic and Cultural Orientation Programme for Tertiary Students (ACTS), currently known as the Preparation for Higher Education Workshop (PHEW!), for sponsored students. Regional students usually come to the Laucala campus at least 3 weeks before the semester commences in order to settle down. During this period, the orientation for such students takes place, followed by the Orientation Week programme for all new students that is in the week before the semester begins. A program during the orientation week would look something similar to the one below however it was conducted online instead of F2F:



## Semester 1, 2022 First Year Students Orientation Programme

Wednesday 23 March | 10am - 12noon  
Japan ICT Multi-Purpose Lecture Theatre

Join via Zoom: <https://usp-fj.zoom.us/j/84368618944?pwd=SIV3QVFoUllTSHdBZSs1SWQvODNCQT09>  
Password: USP@22



**Students enrolled in the following disciplines are encouraged to attend:**

- ▶ Accounting
- ▶ Finance
- ▶ Economics
- ▶ Official Statistics
- ▶ Population Studies & Demography

10:00 AM	Welcome by Ms. Pauline Ryland, MC
10:03 AM	Prayer by Dr. Ilmotama Cawi
10:05 AM	Address by Dr. Nacanieli Rika, Acting Head of School (HoS)
10:20 AM	Cultural Performance – Item No. 1
10:25 AM	Address by Mr. Clayton Kuma, Academic Advisor for Accounting
10:35 AM	Address by Dr. Rup Singh, Deputy HoS – Learning & Teaching and Academic Advisor for Economics
10:45AM	Ice-breaker – Activity 1 (2 Questions)
10:50 AM	'Keeping on Track' by Ms. Joycelyn Devi, Student Learning Specialist
11:00 AM	'Staying Connected' by Mr. Akshay Ram, First Year Experience Coordinator
11:10 AM	Cultural Performance – Item No. 2
11:15AM	Ice-breaker – Activity 2 (2 Questions)
11:20AM	'Coping with the New USP Environment' by Senior Commerce Students (2 Students @ 5mins each)
11:30 AM	Address by FIA representative
11:40 AM	Address by SAFE Student representative
11:50 AM	Introduction of School Support Staff
11:55 AM	Vote of Thanks by Ms. Charlotte Taylor
12:00 PM	Distribution of refreshment packs

For any further questions, contact:  
Akshay Ram | First Year Experience Coordinator  
[akshay.ram@usp.ac.fj](mailto:akshay.ram@usp.ac.fj) | P (679) 323 31946

**Refreshments will be provided!**

**Figure 2: First year students' orientation programme**  
(Source: SAFE's First Year Students Orientation Programme, 2022)

### **COVID-19: students and teachers social vulnerability in distance learning and teaching**

Universities are vulnerable to pandemics, earthquakes, fires, wars, and other natural disasters. Learning and teaching (L & T) might be disrupted for weeks, months, or even longer in the event of a disaster. Some institutions have devised continuity strategies to safeguard critical organisational services and structures, permitting L & T to continue operating. However, little study has been done on how academics, learners, and communities of practise could adapt before, during, and after catastrophes, as well as how their endurance to disruptions can be cultivated to lessen L&T repercussions.

A study by Victoria University of Wellington (Dohaney et al., 2020) with professional and academic staff in the New Zealand context revealed that support, community, leadership, and planning are all important factors in both building and facilitating resilience at universities. Participants in this study, Dohaney et al. (2020), identified various "high impact" incentives that may be utilised to jump-start resilience by tackling numerous barriers. While online and flexible learning are important tools for fostering resilience, especially during a pandemic, universities should not overlook the value of face-to-face interactions between faculty and students. The findings in the paper are a good starting point for people who want to know how universities can be more resilient in the face of big changes and disasters to university education.

Additionally, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2021) reveals that even after a year of efforts around the world to facilitate school reopening, the COVID-19 epidemic has caused substantial disruptions in education and training institutions. This is evident in the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) COVID-19 Case Study (2020) for Fiji, which states that following the first occurrence of COVID-19 in March, the Fijian government closed its borders and imposed strict public health measures, including the suspension of all 1,778 schools across its 332 islands, disrupting the education of almost 230,000 school children. The COVID-19 pandemic also brought attention to the need to improve its preparedness for future, more severe and overlapping calamities. During the current pandemic, Fiji responded by planning better contingency and response plans, as well as making long-term investments in digital learning systems, teacher training to design and manage student-led learning, and addressing long-standing bottlenecks to make schools safer, more supportive, and inclusive (UNICEF, 2020).

Similarly, according to Organisations for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2020, many countries are enacting measures to reduce the number of people congregating in public places as the COVID-19 pandemic progresses. The usual operation of schools and universities has been affected as a result of such initiatives. Because the duration of such measures has been extensive, leaders of public and private educational institutions have set in place alternative methods for students and teachers to continue their courses if they are unable to attend school, and they are working on ways to make schools safer to work in. OECD (2020) survey responses include 333 participants from 99 countries, providing a list of twenty communication tools, learning management systems, and other technologies that teachers, parents, and students can use to create or access educational information. The study concludes that nurturing programmes at the university level for first-year students, especially, are vital for a smooth transition from middle school.

### **Why nurture programs?**

Nurturing programmes are important for first-year university students as many students arrive at university with naive epistemological ideas and study methods that are incompatible with higher education aims or the demonstration of critical or creative thinking skills. Nurturing programmes should include measures to help students adjust to university life, encourage them to adopt suitable university study habits, and provide a general education component to extend the student experience. In the study by Leung & Kember (2013), the influence of the first year experience was investigated by gathering quantitative data on students' assessments of assimilation effectiveness, study behaviour adaptation, the impact of the broadening component, and attribute nurturing. Orientation programs assists students in academic transition by introducing them to the academic life at "The University," enhancing intellectual skills, developing in-depth knowledge in different areas of study, and improving social communication skills (Leung & Kember, 2013).

Furthermore, students frequently are unable to bridge the gap between their needs and current circumstances; tension arises because of study and examinations (Thapthong, 2014). Apparently, the gap between students' current status and their long-term goals is that so many students are not motivated, have poor personal vision, or, due to COVID-19, have not had at least two years of face-to-face contact with teachers. This is why the University of the South Pacific (USP) has developed the "Semester Zero" programme that would nurture first-year university students, ensuring a smooth transition to higher education as well as improvement in students' own mastery and adaptability through the program.

### **Challenges in implementing nurturing programmes during COVID-19**

Implementing or establishing nurturing programmes to counteract any disaster comes with its own set of problems. COVID-19 has been a completely new experience for everyone, and introducing nurturing programmes in such a situation is difficult. Technical difficulties, inadequate access, and connection concerns are frequently cited as barriers to delivering remote programs. The LEGO Foundation (2021) states that there were also some difficulties in

establishing rapport, maintaining the flow of discussion, and disclosing personal information on digital platforms at first. This necessitates the development of innovative techniques to address the issues that come with implementing nurturing programs. Use of social media channels, collaborative tools such as live chat, and "fun activities" such as treasure hunts, for example, keep users actively involved. Participants in Semester Zero at USP participated in daily live treasure discussions and treasure hunting activities to find their clue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the risk factors generally associated with poor mental health. This is largely because many have experienced loneliness, stress, and sadness because of this pandemic. A recent study by Wang, X. et al. (2020) found high levels of mental discomfort among university students during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: in an online poll conducted in the United States, 48.1% of students reported increased despair and 38.5% reported increased anxiety. In parallel, in a larger survey amongst 89588 Chinese college students, 41.1% expressed an increase in anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fu et al., 2020). This is a clear indication that to mitigate the psychological harm caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, university students should get timely and adequate psychological therapy as well as the implementation of interactive programmes that would assist students in combating issues like loneliness and sadness.

### **USP Semester Zero**

The USP Semester Zero programme was produced in response to requests from the Senior Management Team to prepare prospective students for tertiary studies at USP, considering the change in Semester 1–2022 commencement date resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and an extended break for prospective regional students.

The University acknowledged that the pandemic posed unique challenges for students to transition to tertiary studies. As such, the University's Vice Chancellor and President (VCP) Prof Pal Ahluwalia and Acting Deputy Vice Chancellor Education (ADVCE) Prof Jito Vanualailai approached the University's Centre for Flexible Learning, which is a section of the University that manages USP's e-learning platform, Moodle, to design and implement a programme to support provisional students for year 2022.

Semester Zero, the term coined by the VCP of USP, and ADVCE, was a first-of-its-kind programme for USP's provisional students. Similar concepts have been tried at other tertiary institutes in the world. However, the Semester Zero program's length, outreach, and content definitely make it a first in the world.

In the past, the orientation programme at USP used to be a hustle and bustle time at any of the USP campuses. Additionally, the USP Transition Buddies (the volunteer senior students) would take the students around the campuses to showcase what the university campus has to offer. With the pandemic, things could not be as they used to be. Students should not be left behind, and the university had to act proactively to provide them with the much-deserved orientation and nurturing these students require. Thus, the university, in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), came up with the idea of designing an online orientation and nurturing programme for all provisional students intending to come to USP. From January 24 to March 31, 2022, the University hosted the Semester Zero programme fully online on the COL Moodle platform to provide an opportunity for students to experience what tertiary studies are really like through an online orientation program.

The online learning platform not only provided all the necessary information about USP but also additional introductory literacy, numeracy, and digital skills through games, quizzes, notes, and study guides. The COL-sponsored Moodle page gave these students the opportunity to experience tertiary learning from the safety and comfort of their homes, and at the same time gave them remedial practise, confidence-building, and familiarity with university study. The contents identified were necessary for first-year students to grasp in order to ensure a smooth transition to their first-year studies. Navigating Moodle is a common problem for many first-year students; thus, it was fitting to design the programme to emulate USP Moodle. There are many guides available, but it is more enriching when users get to try out these features themselves. This programme helped prospective students get used to the features and get a "feel" of university studies even before they joined USP.

Users were required to create an account to access the page. A list of prospective students who had already received an ID number from USP were given access using the information they had already provided to avoid any confusion.

The page also collected user data on results of activities and number of attempts, which will later be used to create a profile of actual enrolled students, so the university's student learning support sections can reach out to them from the first day. The contents and activities included in the page were not too "bulky" and were designed with the target audience in mind, including "gamification" elements to keep students engaged.

The Semester Zero programme had self-assessed activities (multiple choice quizzes, matching, True/False, etc.) that enabled prospective students to learn important skills necessary for university studies and allowed them to experience the various types of activities used in Moodle. It included things they would use as part of their studies at USP. Some of the content in the programme included the following items:

- Studying at USP (information about programmes, admission procedures, registering for courses etc.).
- Support services – Student Learning Support, Campus Life, Disability Resource Centre, Counselling Centre, Sports, and Activities on Campus, Library, Security services and Information Technology Services.
- Learning & Life Skills – study skills, stress, managing studies.
- Literacy skills:
- Numeracy skills:
- First Year Experience Buddy Linking – online.
- Time management – course planner, weekly planner.
- Information about Disability Resource Centre.
- Getting ready for USP – preparing for F-F orientation, Important Dates, information about admission procedures, registering for courses, Handbook & Calendar.
- Support services on campus.
- Links for important information about USP and other COL resources.

### **Benefit/Risk Analysis**

There are important benefits and risks analysis that all organisations normally conduct before implementing any project. Similarly, the University considered the following before the implementation of Semester Zero.

#### **Benefits**

A programme such as this would allow prospective students to be e-ready for university. It would give learners a glimpse of university studies. Students would get a "feel" of the university. It would introduce students to self-directed learning, which is an important element necessary for the transition from high school to university study. It would familiarise students with the e-platform (Moodle), and students would be able to navigate the platform even before they arrived at university. Semester Zero could be used for marketing purposes for USP since it sets us apart from other universities and reemphasises the USP brand. It could be used as a good marketing tool for USP, especially considering the restructured semester dates and the short timeframe for prospective students to enrol. The programme demonstrated USP's innovation to pro-actively respond to the current needs of our Pacific communities since the programme was open to all prospective students. Semester Zero was seen as an avenue for students to use their time constructively, especially for students in the region who would be at home waiting for about 3 months for the university to open. It was potentially an early engagement of prospective students who could get well versed in the system to entice enrolment. It could facilitate remote orientation and help students transition from online to campus with ease. Finally, it was a planning strategy to prepare for any future delays to F-F classes; some students may be hesitant to enrol in F-F mode (regional students may not even come to the Laucala campus).

#### **Risks**

Given USP's geographical spectrum, one had to be aware of the risks associated with any such innovative program. A few very obvious risks were related to the lack of internet and computer access for targeted students. Secondly, Fiji students' Year 13 (priority) and Year 12 exam dates overlap with Semester Zero. Year 13: 1–11 February 2022 (3 weeks); Year 12: 7–17 February 2022 (4 weeks). There was no incentive for students to enrol in the programme since they would not receive any credits upon completion. Regardless of the fact that the programme included quizzes and games, the content could "scare away" prospective students. Without any pre-evaluation carried out on the prospective students' resource accessibility, it is impossible to draw the success rate of such programs. Given that the programme was designed within a very short time frame, there was no staff recruited to oversee the program, making the existing

human resources overstretched. There was a possibility of poor students' attendance, despite the university's commitment.

After working on the benefits and risks, a mitigation strategy was planned and implemented. It included looking into the value and weight of the programme content, among other issues. It was decided that the content be designed to be a commitment of at least 4 hours/week each. The contents were not to be too bulky, giving ease for students to catch up in case they fell behind (especially Fiji students). To ensure prospective students understood the value of the Semester Zero program, an aggressive marketing strategy was to be implemented. It was suggested that some funds for prizes could be allocated as a form of incentive for the learners. It was also decided that more Open Education Resources (OER) would be used. This would introduce learners to the OER that they could use in the future as much as possible. Coordinators could be appointed to lead skills and facility-related tasks. Such planning would encourage staff to consider the unique situation we are in and invest in the importance of innovating for the current needs of the community. Staff could consider the possible impact of such programmes on student numbers in 2022.

### **Student enrolment and feedback**

**Table 1: Student enrolment**

<b>Total enrolments</b>	<b>Inactive participants</b>	<b>Active participants</b>
3526	2429	1097

Source: [www.uspsupport.colvee.org](http://www.uspsupport.colvee.org)

As stated in the table above, 3526 first year students enrolled at USP for semester 1, 2022 studies. Students in first-year or foundation programmes were automatically enrolled in semester zero. It was discovered that 2429 students were inactive in the programme, which means they had logged in but had not accessed any semester zero activities or content. However, 1097 students actively participated in the programme and received a participation certificate. Despite the fact that the expectations were substantially higher, with at least 80% of first-year students attempting the programme, only 31.11 percent of students successfully finished the semester zero programme.

There could have been a number of reasons why students chose not to participate in the programme. First and foremost, it is critical to remember that semester zero was not a mandatory programme or course for all first-year students. Secondly, some students may not have been aware of the programme since they live in remote areas and do not have access to the news media. Many students enrolled in to the programme but did not access the contents probably due to a lack of access to gadgets and a poor internet connection. Other factors to consider include students who have just finished their Year 12/13 exams without at least two years of face-to-face interaction and are still undecided about which institution to go for their post-secondary education. Final test results, which are given a few days before USP semester 1 begins, will have an impact on students' decisions. Another reason could be that semester zero provides basic literacy, numeracy, digital, and life skills that students are already familiar with and do not feel compelled to complete. These justifications are completely based on assumptions created by the current or previous situations and circumstances in which students find themselves. The feedback on the semester zero programme was gathered by USP's marketing department.

## Feedback



**USP** Shaping Pacific Futures  
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC

**Semester ZERO**

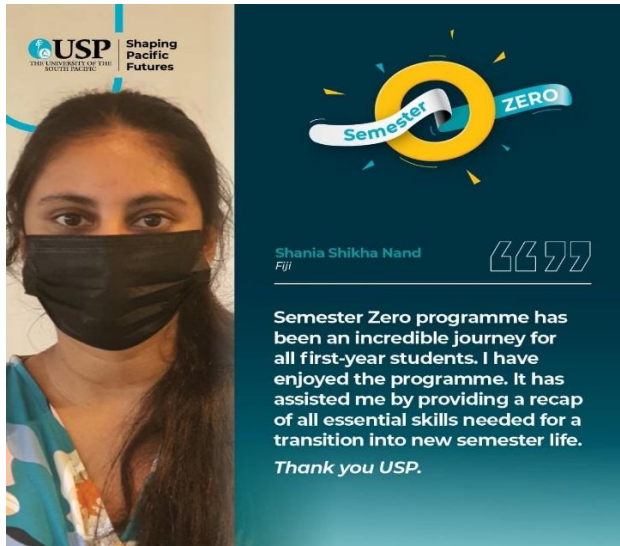
**Esther Prudence**  
Nakasi, Fiji

As a guardian of Mere Kebakoula, I can testify & vouch that semester zero is an integral part of transiting our children from secondary school to tertiary journey.

This free online programme will assist my child to settle quickly and adapt to USP's academic environment. Thank you USP for providing such a good incentive for first-year students. Thank you USP providing such good incentive for first year students.



Guardian's feedback



**USP** Shaping Pacific Futures  
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC

**Semester ZERO**

**Shania Shikha Nand**  
Fiji

Semester Zero programme has been an incredible journey for all first-year students. I have enjoyed the programme. It has assisted me by providing a recap of all essential skills needed for a transition into new semester life. Thank you USP.

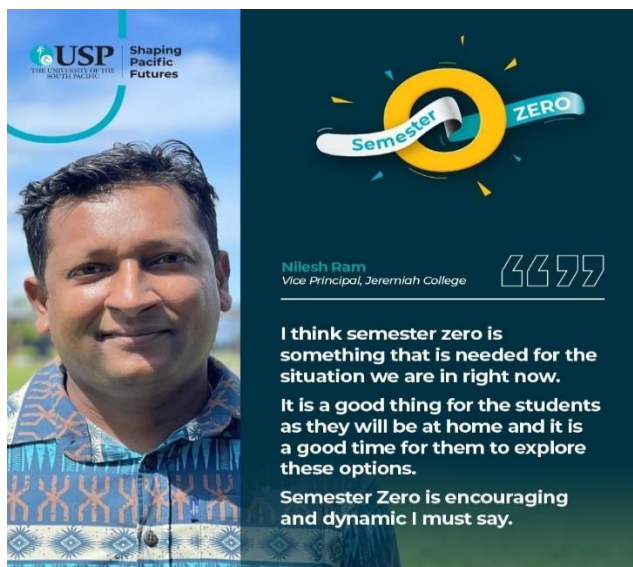


First-year student's feedback





← Head of school's feedback



← Vice Principal's feedback

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

We cannot prevent disasters from occurring, but we can choose and adjust how exposed our universities are to them. In the South Pacific region, the Semester Zero programme was the first of its type. It's crucial to highlight that this research is preliminary, as more programmes in the South Pacific are needed, such as Semester Zero, feedback on students' experiences through interviews, and in-depth studies on the various demands of first-year students, taking into account their current situations.

According to this study, more research and publication in the field of orientation and nurturing programmes is needed for effective and participatory learning and teaching. . The following are some possible future research suggestions:

- Cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills needed for first-year students.
- Digital tools most effective and efficient for supporting the continuation of teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic.
- In-depth examination on the needs and challenges of the first-year students'.

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