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Teething Problems of the Master of Samoan Studies Programme at the National University of Samoa

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Abstract

The National University of Samoa (NUS) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1984 and commenced its activities as an academic institution in the same year. It started off with only one programme, the University Preparatory Year (UPY) which later came to be called the Foundation Program. There was a gradual build up of programmes over the years which started at the certificate and diploma levels and eventually ended up with bachelors programs in arts, commerce, education, science, and nursing after ten plus years.

At the post graduate level the development of a Masters program was not realized until 22 years later in 2006 under the Centre for Samoan Studies which was established in 1999. The Master of Samoan Studies Programme is made up of two parts – a coursework component and a thesis. The coursework portion is made of a multidisciplinary conglomerate of courses organized by existing faculties which include the Arts, Education, Science, and Commerce. In addition there are Samoan Studies courses by the Centre for Samoan Studies. The programme has yet to graduate its first Masters degree.

This paper looks at the rationale for the establishment of the Master of Samoan Studies program and the teething problems it has faced since its inception. It also examines issues related to student recruitment and numbers, student funding and fees, staff turnover and other problems related to the university environment. Subsequently it provides perspectives regarding future directions in terms of keeping the program sustainable.

Key words: programme, Samoan studies, courses, degree

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Introduction

The National University of Samoa (NUS) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1984 and commenced its activities as an academic institution in the same year. It started off with only one programme the University Preparatory Year (UPY) which was later renamed the Foundation Program. The gradual build up of programmes started with Bachelors programmes in Education (one-off) and Arts, with Commerce, Science, and Nursing being added later within the first decade of the University's existence (NUS Calendar 2009: 12)

Only 45 students started the UPY class in 1984 but over the years NUS gradually increased its student population through the development of a range of academic programmes tailor-made to take care of the majority of Samoa's national manpower development needs. Student numbers peaked in 2008 at 2100 but dropped down to 2050 in 2009 (NUS Council Sept 2009). The reduction in student numbers may be attributed to the impact of the world financial crisis in 2009.

The Establishment of Degree Programmes at NUS

The first degree programme, the Bachelor of Education was launched in 1987 as a one-off initiative to alleviate an urgent need for secondary teachers at the time, a situation which is still unchanged. In 1988 the Bachelor of Arts programme was added on and soon thereafter became the Faculty of Arts. The first graduation in 1990 produced graduates for both programmes.

A year or so after establishing the Bachelor of Arts programme, the Accounting and Business programme run by the Samoa Society of Accountants came under the ambit of the University and it became the Faculty of Commerce. The Faculty of Science was established around the same time. In addition, the national School of Nursing which had been in operation for a few years at a separate location was roped in as the Faculty of Nursing in 1993.

In terms of the training of Samoan teachers this had been carried out separately over many years and was a specific function of the Ministry of Education. It was finally decided by the Government that the responsibility should now come under the NUS. Therefore the addition of teacher education as a formal programme took place in 1997 when the Western Samoa Teachers College was amalgamated with the University and became the Faculty of Education.

The Centre for Samoan Studies

Plans for an Institute of Samoan Studies had been in the pipeline for some time during the 1990s and in 1999 it was finally established. Its proposed mission was “To promote interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research and scholarship for the benefit of Samoa and its people, addressing Samoa’s natural resources and environment; and its development in economic, technical, commercial, political, theological, medical, educational and cultural spheres” (Meleisea, 1998: 1). Over the years adherence to this mission has been a priority with regards to the Institute’s mandated service within the academic environment of NUS.

As a young university the NUS evolved fairly rapidly during its first two decades of development. This was both true in terms of infrastructure development and academic programmes. A new campus was built by 1997 while new programmes were still being added. The Institute of Samoan Studies was no exception in the tide changes sweeping the NUS. For example in 2005 during the 34th meeting of the University Council a title change took place from ‘Institute’ to Centre for Samoan Studies (CSS). Furthermore the 5 staff members teaching in the Samoan Language and Culture Department of the Faculty of Arts were transferred to the Centre (NUS Council Papers Sept, 2005).

The name change from ‘Institute’ to ‘Centre’ became official with the new NUS Act of 2006 (NUS Calendar 2009: 39).

Under the new Act the CSS came under the umbrella of the Institute of Higher Education (IHE) one of the two institutions of the University, the other being the Institute of Technology (IOT) which previously was the Samoa Polytechnic. The CSS is presently housed together with the Faculties of Arts, Business and Entrepreneurship, Education, Nursing and Science under IHE; while IOT is in charge of 3 technology schools in engineering, maritime, and business and general studies.

Presently the National University of Samoa provides over 60 academic, vocational and professional programmes including the first Master of Samoan Studies programme approved by the University Council in September 2006. This is the only Masters programme currently under offer by the University and is administered by the CSS.

In addition to the above Masters programme, the CSS also administers the Bachelor of Samoan Studies (BSS) Programme as part of the University’s abovementioned programme offerings.

The CSS and Samoan Studies

With respect to the BSS Programme a number of developments took place that led to its establishment. Previously Samoan Language and Culture courses taught at NUS was under the ambit of the Samoan Language and Culture (SLC) Department then under the administration of the Faculty of Arts. This was the situation until September 2005 when

the University Council made 2 resolutions which changed the course of events for the said Department:

1. That the Department of Samoan Language and Culture be transferred from the Faculty of Arts to the CSS.
2. That a major in the Samoan Language be developed. (NUS Council Papers, Sept 2005).

The resolutions became effective in 2006. Up until the end of 2005 Samoan Language and Culture courses were part of a minor for the Faculty of Arts' BA Programme. The transfer of the SLC Department to the CSS did not come easy and caused a lot of consternation and unhappiness in the Faculty of Arts¹. Nevertheless the Council decision prevailed and the changes were carried out accordingly.

With the transfer of the Samoan Language and Culture Department to the CSS in 2006 changes were made to the objectives of the CSS. Under its mandate the CSS developed the following objectives to guide it:

1. To promote knowledge and understanding of Samoa and its people by according priority to Samoan Studies.
2. To establish a centre of excellence in research and teaching in Samoan Studies.
3. To identify, initiate and coordinate research in priority areas of development.
4. To coordinate and encourage ongoing research that might contribute to the promotion of Samoan Studies.
5. To solicit funding for the work of the Centre from national and international organizations.
6. To establish teaching programmes at all tertiary levels that would enhance Samoan Studies as an area and discipline worthy of study of its academic value and increase its potential in the employment market.
7. To promote discourses and disseminate knowledge of Samoan Studies through seminars, conferences, workshops, and publications.
8. To establish a Directory of Expertise and promote the University as a provider of consultancy services.
9. To undertake any activity that would promote Samoan Studies both nationally and internationally (NUS Calendar 2009: 39).

Samoan Studies under the CSS

In the aforesaid objectives, Samoan Studies as an academic discipline is not only overarching but pivotal to the Centre's role. Within this context it is important to recognize the need to promulgate Samoan language and culture within the realm of national university education to keep it in the forefront of Samoan people's thinking. This is based on the belief that the National University of Samoa is the establishment to which

¹ FOA Senior Staff made a submission to Senate in June 2005 against this transfer, but was lost (NUS June Senate Papers 2005); also Associate Prof. Unasa Felise Vaa – personal communication 20th Sept 2009.

Samoans look up to as the top of the Samoan educational hierarchy. In this way it would help to ensure sustainability of Samoan Studies into the future².

In terms of supporting the aforesaid objectives a number of principal aims within the realm of Samoan Studies have been developed to provide vision and guidance within the context of the aforementioned objectives. These include:

- Providing a programme relevant to cultural and social needs of the individual and Samoan community;
- Enhancing the Samoan identity and affirming the concept of faasamoa (Samoan way);
- Effecting an education to sustain and strengthen Samoan language, culture, values and beliefs in a rapidly changing world;
- Preparing a Samoan for the cultural, social, economic, and political changes in Samoan society and how to cope with them;
- Enhancing awareness of other cultures and peoples most likely to influence the Samoan way of life;
- Identifying and analyzing crucial contemporary issues and their impact on Samoan society; and
- Recognizing the status of Samoa (culturally, socially, economically and politically) and what is Samoan in the global and international family of nations (NUS Calendar 2009: 49)

The development of Samoan Studies as manifested in the BSS Programme also took a further step forward with an additional push to establish the Master of Samoan Studies (MSS) Programme which in itself was a masterstroke in forward thinking for the discipline. While the Faculty of Arts was in disarray over the transfer of the Samoan Language and Culture Department to the CSS, a concurrent move was made to establish the Master of Samoan Studies Programme. This resulted in the third NUS Council Resolution of September 2005 which gave approval for the Master of Samoan Studies (MSS) programme to be coordinated by and housed under the CSS (NUS Council Papers Sept 2005).

The initial proposal was for a Master of Arts in Samoan Studies, but this was thwarted by the Arts Faculty which claimed the right to all academic matters to do with the word 'Arts' at NUS. This was also the situation when the Bachelor of Arts in Samoan Studies Programme was initially proposed. Therefore the only choice left in terms of nomenclature was 'Bachelor of Samoan Studies' which was further extended to the 'Master of Samoan Studies' at the Masters level.

Establishment of the Master of Samoan Studies Programme

Steps towards consolidating the MSS Programme made rapid progress in 2006 during which time course preparations were under way. The University Council gave official

² Seiuli Vaifou Aloalii Temese: Head of Dept, Samoan Language & Culture – personal communication 15th Sept 2009

approval in September of the same year for the programme to start at the beginning of 2007.

With respect to courses needed to satisfy coursework requirements under the MSS Programme, collaboration was sought with the other faculties, namely, the Arts, Business and Entrepreneurship, Education, Nursing, and Science. Each faculty was asked to contribute at least one course to the programme. The response was quite encouraging and the result was a multidisciplinary conglomerate of course offerings to which all faculties contributed. A brief on each course is as follows (indicated by title):

1. Approaches to Samoan Studies: A historical approach on research methods that examine a variety of perspectives through which Samoan society could be studied and understood (one of two compulsory courses taught by CSS staff).
2. Researching Samoa: Examines a selection of research methods in the social sciences with a focus on preparing a research proposal based on a topic of the student's own choosing (one of two compulsory courses taught by CSS staff).
3. Samoan Migration and Development: History of Samoan migration to the metropolitan countries USA, Australia, and New Zealand – the countries serving as host nations for the vast majority of Samoan migrants. (elective taught by CSS/Faculty of Arts staff)
4. In-depth Study of the Samoan Language: Examining prescriptive and descriptive aspects of the Samoan language as well as the relationship between language use and social change (elective taught by CSS staff)
5. Selected Issues in Information & Communication Technology (ICT) in Samoa: An examination of the formulation of ICT policies and the development of e-strategy issues in the management of information systems (elective taught by Faculty of Science Staff).
6. Global Environmental Issues and Samoa: Addresses key areas of global environmental concerns and sustainable development including atmospheric emissions, climate change, stratospheric ozone depletion etc., and global initiatives taken to address these concerns. Also examines the state of Samoa's environment in relation to the aforesaid issues (elective taught by Faculty of Science staff).
7. Issues of Education in Samoa: This course examines mind sets and prior knowledge about educational theory and practice which in the main had been filtered through the cultural lens of Western and European societies and thinkers (elective taught by Faculty of Education staff).
8. Community Organization and Health: Developing a holistic approach to health and health promotion by examining concepts and models that explore interactions between physical, psychosocial, occupational and economic systems in health maintenance, illness prevention, rehabilitation and disability self-management (elective taught by Faculty of Nursing and Health Science).
9. Economic Development in Samoa: The course looks at economic models fitting the context of Samoa as well as other Pacific countries. Furthermore, students learn to analyze other issues and engage in ongoing policy debates (elective taught by Faculty of Business and Entrepreneurship staff).

10. Images of Samoa in English Post Colonial Literature: Examines images of Samoa in the creative writing of indigenous and migrant writers, viewing them as valuable literary representations in the overall corpus of Pacific Literature written in English, from both insider and outsider perspectives (elective taught by Faculty of Arts staff).

In essence all faculties made productive contributions in terms of the scope of the courses they came up with. Topics cover areas pertinent to education and development in Samoa and also reflect contemporary concerns at tertiary level especially in research, science and the environment, information technology, community health, English literature, education, economic development, Samoa language, and migration issues. To a large extent these make manifest the principal aims intended for Samoan Studies.

The launching of the Master of Samoan Studies Programme in 2007 was a fulfillment of one of the Centre’s main objectives, that is, to establish teaching programmes at all tertiary levels that would enhance Samoan Studies as an area and discipline worthy of study for its academic value and furthermore to increase its potential in the employment market (NUS Calendar 2009: 48).

The MSS programme itself is made up of two parts – a coursework component and a thesis, which takes up a total period of 2 years fulltime. Full time students need to pass 6 courses in the first year before matriculating to the thesis stage in the second year. Provision is made for students who cannot maintain the minimum grade point average to reach the thesis stage. They can exit at one of the two levels in a ‘stair-casing’ arrangement as given in Table 1.

Table 1: MSS Programme Stair-casing Pathway

| Level | No. Compulsory Courses | No. Elective Courses | Qualification |
|-------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 1 | Post Graduate Certificate |
| 2 | 2 | 4 | Post Graduate Diploma |

The provision for Post Graduate Certificate is made to accommodate students who wish to withdraw from the Post Graduate Diploma Programme before they can complete it for one reason or another. No students have yet applied to graduate with a Post Graduate Certificate (NUS Calendar: 50).

As of the first semester 2009 eight students have graduated with Post Graduate Diplomas, 4 in first semester 2008 and 4 in first semester 2009. Four of them were able to reach thesis stage and are continuing with their theses writing targeted for completion at the end of the 2009 academic year. The programme has yet to produce its first graduate with a Master of Samoan Studies degree.

Teething Problems Faced by the MSS Programme

Since its inception there have been a number of problems to do with the establishment of the MSS Programme. Some of these have been alluded to in the course of exposition of this paper; for example the transferring of staff from the Faculty of Arts to the CSS and the clash over nomenclature rights. Currently there are problems being faced by the programme as it ventures forward into the future. Those being experienced right now include the following:

1. **Nature of Student Clientele:** So far only full-time working people are enrolled in the MSS programme which means all students attend part-time. The nature of full time work reflects on the quality of assignments. As a number of students are on duty travel at times, it also affects attendance and prompt handing in of assignments. It has affected policy implementation to a large extent. There has been an average of 5 enrollees for most courses offered; the highest number enrolled in a course is 11 while other courses have had one student each. This poses questions on the viability of some courses and hence of the programme as a whole. On the other hand there needs to be more dedicated efforts to market the courses and the Centre.
2. **Effects of nature:** The year 2009 has been a most unusual year in relation to the global swine flu and the tsunami which recently affected Samoa at the end of September. The effects of these resulted in the closure of the University for a number of days and drastically shortened the second semester and consequently affected work quality on students' part. Students were counseled and given time extensions to complete outstanding assignments.
3. **Lack of guidelines and/or procedures to guide the supervision of Masters Thesis writing:** There is scant information at best in the NUS Calendar regarding the responsibilities of supervisors and students. This is not enough in terms of getting students to make progress, as they expect staff to follow them up with their work; likewise staff expect students to come to them. The problem came to the fore when CSS staff were trying to track the progress of thesis students and found very little progress made since the first meeting with supervisors. The CSS is now in the process of developing a set of guidelines regarding this very problem. Meanwhile the pioneering thesis students of the MSS programme will tap on the expertise of 2 staff members who have worked at overseas universities where there is wide experience in thesis supervision.
4. **Online access for MSS students:** Access to online resources for assignments and other online activities has been a major problem for students. This is because of the limitations in terms of internet bandwidth available to the University community. The Information and Communication Technology department at NUS also has a micro-managing approach regarding the use of the internet by staff and students. It has caused dissatisfaction for both parties. Internet access is very expensive in Samoa and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. This means innovative ways have to be found in terms of delivery of courses for the MSS programme.
5. **Competition from other faculties wanting to field their own Masters programmes:** The Faculty of Arts has twice failed in its bid to start its own MA programme

- mainly because of issues to do with resources and space utilization. It is only a matter of time before it succeeds. The Faculty of Science also wants to start its own Masters programme. Should there be more than one Masters programme there will be implications on student numbers in terms of Equivalent Full Time Students (EFTS) and therefore on the economic nature of programmes as a whole. NUS management needs to consider this issue carefully and think about the logistics for new Masters courses before approving a new one.
6. Finding scholarship funds to supplement student fees: Fees for the Post Graduate Diploma courses are expensive for students and as a result the CSS has had to solicit donations from a number of donors in the business community to help sponsor students. Donors expected their money's worth from students.
 7. Shortage of funds to carry out research work: The Samoa Government has drastically cut down university funding which has also affected the provision of research funds. In order for proper field research training to be carried out there has to be sufficient funds to enable this. It is incumbent on research staff and supervisors to find funds outside normal funding sources to help out with student research.

Conclusions

The National University of Samoa, in establishing its first Masters degree programme under the Centre for Samoan Studies needs to take into account the principles of supply and demand in terms of student numbers before approving another Masters degree programme. The current market in terms of student numbers is not very promising right now. For the time being one Masters programme is sufficient to cater for the needs of faculties, especially with the collaborative course arrangement now in force.

Secondly, it is important for all collaborators to find solution(s) to the lack of online efficiency which impinges on the performance of both staff and students. The internet is an important part of today's education culture; therefore its influence cannot be undermined. One solution is to overhaul the entire system of servers. This needs funds. The University management needs to find ways to get such funds.

On the matter of staff differences at the faculty level, collaborators from different faculties have been able to cast their differences aside and work together for the good of the programme. This is a good sign for moving ahead. Faculties apart from CSS that want to develop their own Masters programme should wait a few more years yet before reconsidering proposing their own programme.

Guidelines regarding responsibilities of both supervisors and thesis students are currently being developed. It is important to learn from the experience of other universities particularly those with backgrounds similar to the NUS. These include universities in French Polynesia, Fiji, Hawaii and Guam.

Payment of fees for students continues to be a problem and finding donors to help out in terms of scholarships is not easy. Donor funding is not that much nor are the number of

donors, but getting something is better than nothing. A number of students continue to pay their own course fees.

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