Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme navigates COVID-19 through online learning

The Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme (PFLP) is an adaptive professional, leadership development programme. It was initiated by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, after consulting Pacific leaders on how New Zealand can support Pacific Island countries and territories achieve the goals of the Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries (FFA and SPC 2015). A review demonstrated that a key challenge in achieving the goals of the Roadmap is the lack of leadership skills within emerging leaders. The overall goal of the programme is to "increase economic and food security benefits from well-managed and sustainable fisheries and aquaculture in the Pacific" (MFAT 2015). To achieve this goal, the long-term goal of PFLP is to create "a regional pool of current and emerging leaders that are capable and confident to address Pacific fisheries priorities and strengthen regional fisheries leadership and cooperation" (FAME MEL 2020).

So far, PFLP has trained 98 participants from 14 different Pacific Island countries, of which 47% are female (PFLP 2020). COVID-19, however, has impacted the delivery of this programme. Travel restrictions have hindered face-to-face delivery of the course content, leading PFLP to adapt rapidly. COVID-19 has affected almost all forms of education and capacity development programmes, leading to a switch to online learning to ensure continuation of content delivery (OECD 2020; Li and Lalani 2020). Consequently, the digital divide between people has increased, with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reporting that more 826 million students do not have access to required technologies, and more than 706 million do not have access to the internet at home (Amporo and Nabbuye 2020; Burns 2020).

In this context, the following question was asked: "How effective is e-learning in the case of PFLP?" This was the main question of preliminary research on the effectiveness of this "new way" of teaching and learning. To assess the effectiveness of online teaching and learning within PFLP, a framework was created based on existing literature. The framework illustrates two overarching themes: individual learning and group-based learning.

Individual online learning allows for the assessment of participants' response to the course, learning outcomes and preliminary behavioural changes, which can be compared to those achieved through face-to-face learning. Face-to-face group learning highlights participant engagement, interaction and motivation, and how these differ from those achieved through individual online learning.

Figure 1. Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme cohort 2. (image: ©PFLP 2020)
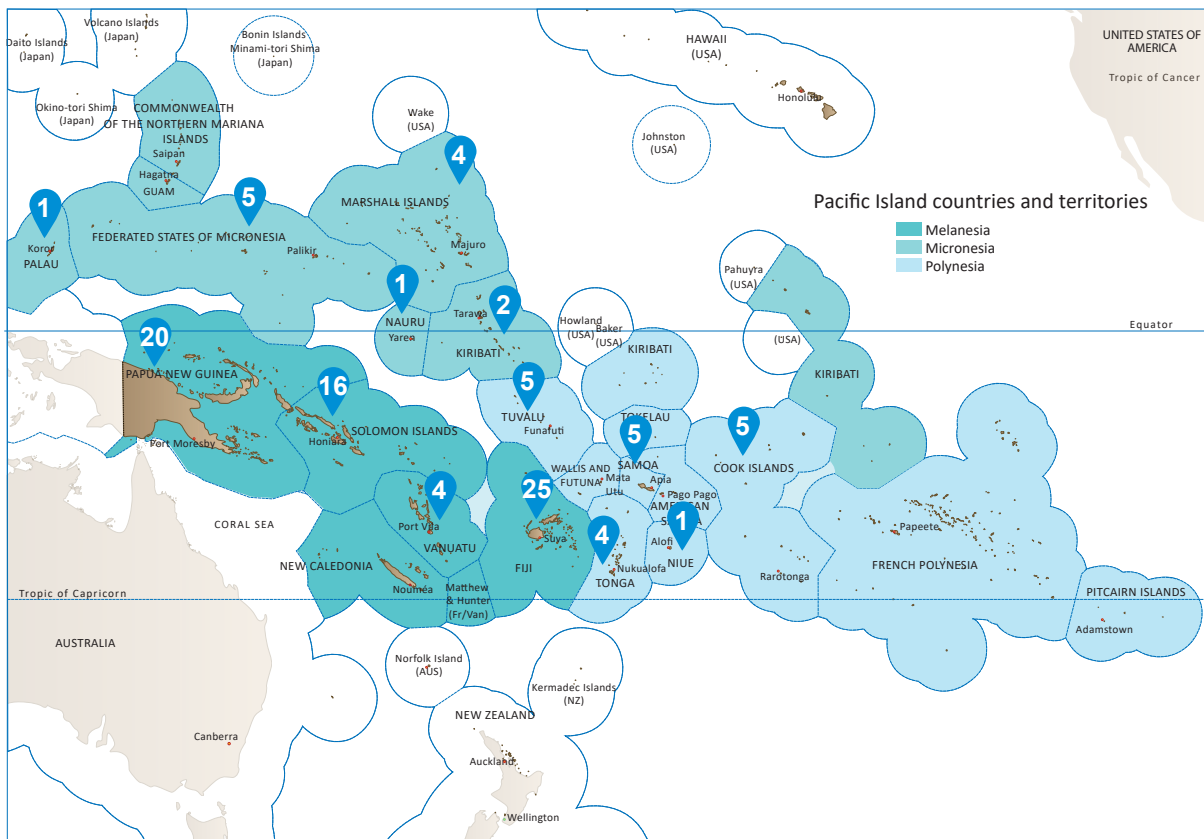
Figure 2. Distribution of Pacific Fisheries Leadership Programme participants. (image: ©SPC)

In total, 19 participants were interviewed, both face-to-face and online. Additionally, four PFLP staff members were interviewed to gain an additional perspective of the difference between the two modes of learning. These data were triangulated with data from participant feedback surveys.

The research revealed the advantages and disadvantages for both types of learning. With regard to face-to-face learning, it was clear that participants were able to build stronger relationships with one another and with the facilitators. Participants stated that they created groups on social media in order to keep in contact and share experiences and challenges. These strong relationships will be beneficial to address the multitude of challenges that the Pacific fisheries sector is facing (Bell et al. 2011; FAO 2020). In addition, overall motivation was higher and participants were highly engaged during face-to-face learning because they were removed from their work environment and had limited distractions. The distances that some participants need to travel, and the time away from the office, often makes it impossible or extremely difficult to attend courses outside their home country.

In terms of online learning, the course became more accessible to fisheries officers within the region. It was not necessary for them to be out of office for a prolonged period of time, and long distances were not an issue. Having the course online also allowed them to continue working while increasing their leadership capacity. Furthermore, online learning enabled facilitators to adapt the course quickly according to participants' needs. With online learning, how-

ever, there is little to no interaction among participants or with the facilitators, resulting in rather weak relationships. Moreover, engagement throughout the online session was rather limited, with many participants dropping in and out of sessions. This was mainly due to arising work priorities that they needed to be attended to or unstable internet connections.

Nonetheless, all interviewed participants stated that the course content was highly relevant to them and they learned many new aspects of leadership.

> " It's really eye-opening for myself as trying to in progress in terms of the leadership in my work and the content of the training was very good."
>
> PFLP online participant

It became clear that the individual learning of participants was at least as effective in the online session as it was in the face-to-face session. As indicated above, however, group-based learning has been heavily impacted by the online nature of the course. This aspect was not effectively addressed in the online session and has restricted participants from building strong relationships. The group experience was mainly impacted by the two external factors of work priorities and unstable internet connections. Similar trends have also been observed in other capacity development programmes from SPC, and is not solely an issue concerning PFLP.

Resulting from the disadvantages and advantages of both types of learning, a hybrid model seems highly suitable when travel restrictions are lifted. Implementing a hybrid version would mean taking the advantages of both modalities to maximise effectiveness. For instance, PFLP participants could attend the first few sessions in person to engage and interact with each other and start building strong relationships. After a few days, participants could return to their home countries and continue their learning remotely. This would ensure that they are not out of the office for a prolonged period of time, while having had the opportunity of interacting with other participants. The issues surrounding unstable internet connections could be supported by PFLP in the form of data packages.

This hybrid mode of delivery would be almost ideal considering it would combine the advantages of both modalities. However, high travel costs will prevail, and the benefit of the travel needs to be justified. In addition, travel restrictions do need to be lifted in order for this to occur. As long as travel restrictions are still in place in the Pacific Islands region, it is important to continue delivering the programme online. Participants have stated the high relevance of the course. Ultimately, efforts need to continue in order to achieve the goals of the Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries. Under current circumstances, continued adaptation and tailoring of content towards participants' needs will ensure increased effectiveness of online learning.

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