

Teacher Training at the University of the South Pacific

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Introduction

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is the premier regional teacher training institution in the South Pacific. It is jointly owned by the governments of twelve island countries: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Samoa. The university began its teacher training in 1968 when the institution was first established. The School of Education at the university is established to carry out teacher training and continues to offer pre-service and in-service programmes for kindergarten, primary, secondary and tertiary teaching. It offers a diversity of educational programmes through distance and flexible learning, online and face to face mode through a variety of media at different campuses in the region. From the university thousands of young men and women acquire the teaching licenses to teach children in schools, virtually holding the destiny of the future generations in their hands. The University graduated its first cohort of 32 students in 1971. Till date over 30,000 graduates have successfully completed their studies. Today the university has an enrolment of over 19,000 students studying in all 12 countries.

Student teachers/trainees receive training in academic and practical aspects of teaching at the university. Teaching practice is entrenched in the teacher training programme. The practical aspect of the training at the university involves an attachment at a host school for a period of seventeen weeks. During this spell the student teachers are under the guidance of experienced teachers from the host schools who wear the cap of mentors. Such attachments often become extra challenging for the student teachers, for their teachings would be observed and assessed by the school mentors and the teacher educators. In order to provide effective mentoring during teaching practice, the experienced teachers and the teacher educators at the university continue to identify the areas that their student teachers need the greatest amount of assistance in developing their teaching capabilities. This whole process can be quite challenging.

Administration

The academic schools, institutes and centres at the university are organised into three faculties and controlled by Deans. These are: the Faculty of Arts, Law and Education; the Faculty of Business and Economics; and the Faculty of Science, Technology and Environment. Each Faculty comprises of a number of schools which offer a wide range of academic programmes and courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The University also offers programmes through distance and flexible learning in a variety of modes and technologies throughout USP's 14 campuses (three in Fiji).

The School of Education

The School of Education (SOEd) is the leading pre-service and in-service teacher education institution of excellence within the Pacific region. It upholds quality learning and teaching, and provides quality educational services as well as professional development programmes. SOEd prepares quality teachers, teacher educators, tertiary teacher educators and educational leaders and also provides on-going professional development programmes.

Teacher Education Programmes

- a) Certificates available by Distance & Flexible Learning mode (DFL):
- Certificate in Non-formal Education
 - Certificate in Teaching (primary & secondary) – for untrained teachers
 - Certificate in Basic Skills in Library/Information Studies

b) Diplomas available by DFL:

- Diploma in Early Childhood Education
- Diploma in Teaching (Secondary)
- Diploma in Leadership and Assessment
- Diploma in Special and Inclusive Education

c) Undergraduate Teacher Education Programmes available by DFL:

- BEd (In-service) Primary and Secondary
- BEd (Untrained teachers) Primary and Secondary (stair-casing)
- BEd (In-service) Early Childhood, Special Inclusive Education
- BA/BSc GCEd – Secondary (flexi-mode)

d) Postgraduate Programmes for Teachers and Teacher Educators

- GCTT – 2 Courses - ED401 & ED402 (online)
- PGDTT – 4 Courses (GCTT + ED403 [online& ED459]
- PGDE – 4 Courses.
- MEd – PGDE + 2 Courses + SRP
- MEd – PGDE + 4 Courses (by course work)
- PGCE – 9 Education Courses (2 teaching subjects)
- MA in Ed – PGDE + Thesis
- PhD – Thesis

Teaching practice/Practicum

Any teacher education institution must have a commitment to good education if student teachers are to value and promote education (Beachum, McCray, Yawn & Obiakor, 2013). Teacher training has been identified as one of the important components of teacher preparation (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). The excellence of education is greatly determined by the quality of teachers, thus, great effort is being made at the University of the South Pacific to improve the quality of teacher education. It is important to equip the student teachers with a high sense of self-belief and confidence to face the challenges of the classroom and community. Often the student teachers struggle in teaching, and many times the universities have been criticised for not preparing the trainee teachers well enough (Hudson, 2012). Restructuring of teacher preparation process is highly crucial for professional development and empowerment of the teachers. Thus, there is a crucial need to solve the problems of present teacher education system (Singh, 2011). Vieira (2007) believes that teachers of today need to be prepared to face more difficulties and dilemmas than they would expect in a more traditional classroom. The teacher educator's role is crucial, even more so when the student teachers find themselves in vulnerable situations where they need to have the skills to survive (Loughran, 1997). It is important that trainees find ways to:

Understand and connect with their pupils, settle amicably in classrooms, cultivate commitments to students and communities, and ultimately link families, communities and classrooms every day (Jupp, 2013:1).

Teaching today is more challenging than ever before and this is because the learners in schools are becoming increasingly diverse with regard to culture, language, learning needs and social class. The University of the South Pacific continues to provide space for self-reflection to the student teachers because of the challenging exercise of teacher education discourses in relation to the issues of social difference, technology based classroom, students and schools. Samuel (1998) believes that teacher education has to de-link itself from the cultural differences apparent in the schools and society. He suggests a wider partnership between teacher institutions and the host schools, not only to prepare teachers with the required tools, but also to provide the much needed skills to better equip both the teacher educators and the student teachers to take up the challenges. In light of a strong disappointment with the current approaches to teacher training, a plea for an improved emphasis on teacher education with strong networks to the local context is echoed (Islam, Mitchell, de Lange, Balfour & Combrinck, 2011). The university realizes that as teacher educators they need to assess its own pathway to teacher training and hence, possess the ability to stand back and take a bird's eye view of the programmes they are operating and then be willing to participate in the preparation of a programme that suits the changes in the teaching learning arena keeping in mind the technology and community expectations from teachers in the classroom.

The exchange between the university and the host school is unlimited as the student teachers take new ideas and methods to the schools and bring back immense experiences. These features create immediacy between theory and practice in teaching and provide tangible evidence of a professional learning exchange between the two sites. It helps link theory to practice and also provides a significant and reciprocal opportunity for schools to connect with the latest theory and the university to know what is happening in schools (Scott, 2010:19). Positive feedback is a paramount expectation from the university teacher educators and the school mentors to allow student teachers to realistically perceive their progress and share an applicable extent of responsibility with their pupils, thereby moving them away from teacher authority. It humbles them and gives them control and confidence over their performances and constructs an inner feeling of fulfillment. It is a reward that clearly encourages them to execute their roles better as teachers (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1998). A recent phenomenon is sharing teaching experiences that enables the student teachers to learn from each other. It also aids professional development in teacher education (Santagata & Guarino, 2012). To this effect the university places great emphasis on recording and analyzing student teachers experiences during Practicum.

Organisation of Teaching Practice

Teaching practice at the University of the South Pacific is done in a two phases. The first phase is generally introduced in the third year of the teacher education programme. By then the university students have generally covered ample professional courses. Besides a study of the subject disciplines, the programme includes observation of colleagues' micro-teachings, participation in criticism or discussion lessons and finally the actual micro-teachings under the skillful guidance of the teacher educators. Darling-Hammond & Bransford, (2005) belief that if the teacher education programme is designed to include more teaching practice experiences and if more micro-teaching is integrated with coursework, it will certainly make a difference in the pre-service teachers' performances, self-confidence, and long-term commitment to teaching. During the first phase of teaching practice the student teachers are in their first field work for a period of three weeks. They are briefed on their expectations in the host schools by their teacher educators in a two-hour workshop prior to their postings. The trainees follow the schedule of the qualified and experienced teachers in the host schools they choose to do their teaching practice. The intention is for them to gain the feeling of being a classroom teacher. This is appraised through observations, interactions and involvement in most of the school extra-curricular activities.

During the second phase of teaching practice the student teachers are in their final year of study and programmed to spend a whole semester attached to a host school within the vicinity of the university for the purpose of regular monitoring and feedback. This involves a period of fourteen weeks. Prior to their school attachment the trainees attend a three-day workshop. This workshop is a follow-up of the workshops and seminars that are conducted by all teacher educators in their subject discipline. The trainees are encouraged to participate in this workshop to further develop themselves into a learning community that bridges the gap between theory and practice. The focus is also to enable trainees to develop a framework for responsible decision making, to provide opportunities for reflection and discussion and to promote physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. In totality, the teaching practice at the university comprises of approximately 20 hours of in-house professional development and approximately 680 hours of attachment in the schools (17 weeks); a total aggregate of approximately 700 hours.

Assessment

Practicum is 100% coursework and student teachers are expected to participate and complete a number of tasks to qualify to pass the course. These include:

- a) 10% work from the phase one practicum
- b) 90% final year work which includes the following:
 - i) 2 assignments related to practicum experiences
 - ii) Assessment reports by the school mentors.
 - iii) Assessment reports by the USP lecturers.
 - iv) Preparation of lesson plans
 - v) Observation of the teachings of the school mentors.

Moving Forward

Today the School of Education at the University of the South Pacific has availed all its education courses online making it easier for students to access it from anywhere in the world. The school continues to take up new challenges like the Untrained Teachers Project (UTP) which is a partnership initiative between the USP and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The project began in early 2013 with the countries of Vanuatu and Kiribati signing a memorandum of understanding to work collaboratively with USP to support fast-tracking the training for their untrained senior secondary school teacher workforce. This project is currently in its last stage of completion. As part of its ongoing strategic plan, the university is mandated to continue with research and publications. The research output and awards unit provides support for the collection of research publications data.

Conclusion

There is always a national call to produce competent teachers. The University of the South Pacific performs a significant role of providing learning experiences to lead its student teachers from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge. The teacher is the most important component in any educational programme. It is the teacher who is mainly responsible for implementing the educational process at any stage. This confirms that it is vital to invest in the preparation of teachers so that the future of a nation is secure. The university is doing its best to train qualified teachers for the Pacific nations and continues to strive for better.

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