

# Reaching the Unreached Primary Teachers: Distance Teacher Education at the University of the South Pacific

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## BACKGROUND

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is a regional tertiary education provider serving a very large, diverse geographic and cultural area. It consists of 12 member countries which span much of the Pacific region (Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu). The university, through its faculties and schools based largely in Suva, Fiji, delivers many, but not all, of its programmes both to an on-campus cohort of students and through a variety of distance and flexible delivery modes to a cohort of students via smaller campuses in its member countries. Many students living outside the Pacific region's main urban centres, including teachers seeking to upgrade their qualifications, find study in remote locations challenging, as they lack the basic infrastructure such as electricity and the range of communications technologies taken for granted elsewhere. If a programme of study is not offered via distance mode, students need to compete for scarce financial support and relocate to Fiji to study. Until the start

of the 2007 academic year, relocation was the only option for those wishing to complete USP's Bachelor of Education (primary) degree.

The Bachelor of Education (primary) degree emerged out of curriculum discussions in USP's Department of Education and Psychology (since 2005, the School of Education) during the mid-1990s. This initiative was in response to requests from regional Ministries of Education to upgrade the qualifications of primary teachers and also was based on the department's own conviction that good teachers are needed at all levels of education. Also, by the early 2000s, there was a growing body of research indicating a need for greater quality of teachers serving in the Pacific Island countries (see Thaman, 2003; Hindson, 1995; Stewart, 1975). The programme was introduced for the first time in 1999 at the main Suva campus, as a two-year in-service programme for experienced primary teachers in the region.

These desires for greater quality of teachers parallel calls globally (see, for

example, UNESCO, 2007). The particular logics of quality discourse in education have led to an increased pressure on teachers to solve society's social and educational problems. The UNESCO discourse of quality suggests that appropriate teacher preparation and teaching practices, rather than broad government social welfare policy, will help children learn regardless of the sometimes marginalised contexts they inhabit. This shift in thinking is not without its critics (see Smyth, 2001). However, in Pacific schooling it is difficult to deny that factors such as political, economic, and social instability (Campbell, 2006; Moore, 2004; Lal & Pretes, 2001), teacher migration (Voight-Graft, 2003), and a lack of in-service training opportunities (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2001, p. 7) have contributed to a critical shortage of qualified teachers in many Pacific Island states. In addition, overall primary school enrolment growth (see UNESCO, 2007, p. 44, for growth from 1991 to 2005) and an increasing commitment to universal primary education in line with the *Millennium Development Goals* (United Nations, 2008) and *Pacific Plan* (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2005, p. 28) have put added pressure on teacher training provision in the Pacific region.

Even when the on-campus programme was introduced, the plan was to make all the courses in the programme available through the distance mode to enable more primary teachers throughout the region to benefit. However, the time needed to develop distance courses far exceeded the capacity of the department. In late 2002 discussions with AUSAid officials led to the development of a proposal and funding for the BEd primary externalisation project. The three-year project began in 2003 with

the signing of a memorandum of understanding and the granting of funds for the project by the Australian government. The project provided for: academic staffing support for relief lecturing, instructional design, and course writing; resourcing of regional teachers' colleges with computers and other reference materials; professional development of staff in teachers' colleges; and the establishment of a regional teacher education network. The project's basic aim can be summed up in its vision statement (Costa, 2004, p. 3):

A Primary Teacher Education Programme that is accessible by all qualified primary teachers in the region and one that offers opportunities for these teachers to improve their professional knowledge and skills.

In the Pacific region, pre-service primary teacher preparation mostly has been carried out in the region's nine teachers' colleges: Kiribati Teachers' College; Fulton College (Fiji); Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education; Cook Islands Teachers' Training College; Tonga Institute of Education; Corpus Christi Teachers' College (Fiji); Lautoka Teachers' College (Fiji); Solomon Islands College of Higher Education; College of the Marshall Islands. Most of these institutions offer a two-year programme only and award their graduates with a certificate. However, in recent times, some institutions have upgraded their programmes to diploma level or have extended the programme by a further year. For example, Lautoka Teachers' College recently upgraded its certificate to a diploma in primary teaching (Lingam, 2003), with the first cohort graduating in 2006. The short duration of many pre-service programmes has had

an impact on the quality of teachers supplied to schools (Hallack, 1990, p. 178). Also, after teachers have completed their initial professional preparation, very little in-service training is available. Many primary teachers in the Pacific region have no post-secondary qualifications at all. For example, Chandra (2000) points out that in Fiji an alarming 42 percent of teachers have only a form five or lower level of education.

Most teachers enrolling in the USP programme are cross-credited all BEd first-year courses on the basis of their original teacher training certificate. In the case of those who have completed a diploma, additional cross credits are awarded. All teachers are admitted into Year Two of the degree programme. The courses largely follow primary curriculum areas, with a particular emphasis on language and literacy teaching. Other courses involve curriculum and professional issues, pedagogy, and a teaching practicum.

Since the inception of the programme through August 2005, almost 200 teachers had completed the degree. Of those teachers, 86 percent were teachers working in the Fijian education system and of these all were residing in the greater Suva metropolitan area (Burnett & Lingam, 2007, p. 310). Over the years debates over USP's status as a regional institution or a Fijian institution have been long running (see Crocombe, 2001, p. 247ff). A desire to better serve the region, including rural Fiji, was further justification for externalizing the degree programme. The initiative to deliver the programme via distance learning mode is an effective way of addressing the twin issues of increased quality and accessibility in Pacific in-service education delivery. Added to this was

USP's vision to employ a range of modes for course delivery in the region, because of increasing competition from other providers (Burnett, 2004; USP Planning and Development Office, 2002).

### **GOING THE DISTANCE FOR PRIMARY TEACHERS**

To ensure collaborative processes in project decision-making and direction, three groups were established for overseeing the work: the advisory group, the project coordinating committee, and the operating group. The advisory group included the principals from the region's teachers' colleges and the project support staff who were specifically appointed to the project. The project coordinating committee was comprised of aid donor officials from AUSAid, USP School of Education lecturers, and USP senior administrative staff. The operating group included lecturers from the School of Education and instructional designers and editors from USP's Distance and Flexible Learning Support Centre (DFLSC). The latter group was responsible for closely monitoring the progress of the project. The operating group prepared the schedule of activities for the conversion of the courses in the programme to Distance and Flexible Learning (DFL) mode. This group worked closely with the course writers.

Before course writing began on any of the BEd primary course materials, a workshop was held for the course writers with Konai Thaman, a leading Pacific educator and currently the UNESCO Chair in Teacher Education and Culture. The workshop focused on identifying the perceived unique needs of Pacific learners (see Thaman, 2002, 2003; Taufe'ulungaki, 2002, 2003). This helped to ensure that materials were relevant and regionally contextualised.

A work plan was then prepared to ensure the progress of each task. The actual work on the project began in January 2004. In relation to the first task, a retreat was organized to brief all involved in the project, especially those directly involved with course writing. Two points the writers were to consider while writing were thinking about student needs and about course-writing processes. The former included aspects such as a student's level of English, a potentially very heterogeneous student enrolment, and the issues of studying part-time. The second involved in most cases a timely restructure and update of course content that had not been changed for several years.

The major task of course writing involved individual course coordinators, who had been teaching their respective courses to primary teachers since the degree's inception in 1999, and two primary teaching specialists, who also had educational research experience. A locally adapted version of the Commonwealth of Learning's style guide for course writing (1999) was used as the basis for all courses within the programme. With instructional designer input, the teaching text created was accompanied by: contextualized graphics (showing local regional school settings); opportunities for learner reflection and activities with feedback; individual unit concept maps and unit overviews; study planners and a logical scope and sequence of action research concepts, skills, and understandings. Photographs of Pacific people (current BEd students) were used as in-text student mentors to offer friendly guiding direction and comments on topics to help students identify with the content of the material.

The project also sought to utilise primary teacher training expertise from the regional teachers' colleges and the in-country experience of the directors of USP Centres and Ministries of Education from each Pacific Island country. Consultation meetings were organized with these key people in the region both on-campus in Suva and via teleconference to provide input into the project as well as for the project team to brief them on developments. The principals, directors, and ministry officials also were able to identify suitable staff for further professional development, as the project did allocate some funds for development of college staff and to assist in the on-delivery of the degree once externalisation had been completed.

With regards to the professional development of the regional teachers' college staff, two curriculum workshops and a summer school were organized. In addition, some staff from these colleges were sponsored for their own postgraduate study at USP. The purpose of this was to appoint these staff as local in-country tutors. This regional networking with the teachers' colleges was considered essential for the delivery of the courses in the programme. The directors of USP Centres were also closely associated with the project in terms of liaison with their respective Ministries of Education and their nearby teachers' college.

### **PROJECT CHALLENGES**

A range of issues and challenges presented themselves to the writing teams in working toward the final outcomes, including: student access; the use of certain technologies in programme delivery; forming partnerships between USP as the programme provider and

the region's teachers' colleges; and programme articulation. Some of the challenges were addressed in the final outcomes (*see below*), whereas others continue to impact on the quality of the degree's delivery across the region. Ongoing debate, research, and critical reflection at the university, School of Education, regional teachers' college, and Ministry of Education levels are needed to overcome these challenges.

### *Student Access*

Despite externalisation, teacher access to the BEd (primary) degree programme remains problematic from at least two perspectives. There has been a high demand among the region's primary school teachers for the programme since its inception and, predictably, demand has only increased since externalisation was completed.

However, it is only some of the Fijian teachers who are able to self-fund their study. All others rely on winning limited sponsorship support from their own or third-party governments to meet the programme fees set by USP. Fijian teachers also have a greater range of sponsorship options open to them, due largely to Fiji's relatively more buoyant economy. Obtaining sponsorship support in other Pacific countries hinges entirely upon the national planning goals of these countries, their much more limited financial resources, and variance in educational aid policy with donor countries. The key issue here is the balancing of budgetary concerns with desires for a more qualified professional teaching workforce. It is thought that paying the salary increase for teachers' increasing qualifications would not be possible for some regional governments. Thus wide Pacific teacher access to the

programme, despite lower costs because of externalisation, remains limited.

Additionally, where a teacher's location is in a remote, rural part of the Pacific, programme access becomes difficult. USP prides itself on the use of information and communications technologies (ICT) to deliver its programmes into all 12 member nations. However, ICT-facilitated programme delivery in many cases stops short at each urban centre. There are profound challenges for USP around issues of equity associated with rurality and remoteness. Surprisingly, despite the university's increasing use of ICT in its course delivery, "no comprehensive study of access and barriers to technology has been carried out for the USP distance student population" (Gold, Swann, & Yee Chief, 2002, p. 55).

Of course, these challenges are not new (see Mathewson, 1994, 2000; Gold, Swann, & Yee Chief, 2002), nor are they confined to the Pacific region. A number of studies have shown that where high reliance on ICT for educational programme delivery exists, there is the risk of exacerbating pre-existing inequalities based on class and location (see Barraket & Scott, 2001; McInerney, McNamee, & Roberts, 2003). As Taylor (1999) notes, the "unbridgeable gap between the technology haves and have nots" is "highly consistent with the existing gap between the financial haves and have nots." Heavy reliance on ICT also exacerbates the gap between the spatial haves and have nots. The Pacific region is characterised by rapid and, in some cases, unchecked urban growth. Many commentators believe that within several decades more Pacific people will be living in or near urban centres than in rural areas (Storey, 2005, p. 3).

Research is needed to determine whether ICT use that is confined to urban USP study centres might be another contributor to urban expansion. Prior to externalisation, many BEd primary students relocated to Suva from rural parts of Fiji in order to enrol in the degree programme (Burnett & Lingam, 2007).

One possible way of overcoming the problems of equity due to distance is the appointment of an increased number of tutors to each USP centre in the region. These tutors are intended to be local teachers' college personnel who can draw on their experiences as teacher educators with intimate knowledge of the unique characteristics of their county context to serve as a bridge between the USP programme and the rural teachers undertaking the programme. These tutors should have a degree of mobility in their country, as well as access to the ICT needed. At this stage there has not been any tutor employment above normal employment levels at any of USP's in-country campuses. In addition, not all countries have a teachers' college. It remains to be worked out how tutors shall be appointed in countries such as Nauru, Tuvalu, Niue, and Tokelau.

#### ***Information and Communication Technology***

The University of the South Pacific makes ICT use in course delivery a priority and positions itself at the forefront of technology utilization in teaching and learning (see USP, 2003). It appears that quality teaching and learning are more likely to be achieved by the uptake of technology and its use to overcome barriers of distance. However, the costs associated with ICT uptake and the basic infrastructure required to make it viable mean its distribution across the region

is very uneven. For example, in Vanuatu there are 0.1 personal computers (PCs) per 100 inhabitants compared to 5 PCs per 100 inhabitants in Fiji and 50 PCs per 100 inhabitants in the United States (Gold, Swann, & Yee Chief, 2002). Work needs to be done within the region to find ICT that is less cost prohibitive and infrastructure reliant. One current USP interest is in the Solomon Islands' People First Network project, which involves programme delivery to remote students via solar-powered two-way radio mediated e-mail (Leeming, 2003).

The USP externalisation team worked amid tensions around ICT expectations and old tech or no tech approaches to course delivery. A conscious decision was made to use print-based materials as the only equitable way of delivering programmes such as the BEd into remote areas. Some stakeholders suggest a multiple approach should be taken, where teachers that reside in relative proximity to USP centres that house the required hardware could utilise the range of ICTs available. However, equity issues remain unresolved. The print-delivered degree obtained mainly by remote students would not necessarily be the same as the ICT-facilitated degree obtained by the region's urban students. Some consideration is being given to the idea of having separate course offerings. Students would select either the DFL mode or an on-campus/ICT-mediated mode. The intent would be to make the same resources available for both courses. However, this approach does not address the additional resources that would be available for on-campus or ICT-mediated courses through USP centres, teachers' colleges, and the Suva campus.

A different set of challenges also relates to DFL delivery of a programme such as

a teacher training course without using face-to-face contact. There are questions around fundamental issues of human contact between student and lecturer in completing a teacher training course that by necessity involves relationship development. This concern applies to all courses in the programme, but especially to those in areas such as physical education, arts, and language. These are particularly challenging courses to deliver via DFL and might require face-to-face contact either through summer schools, residential schools, or extended periods of time with the course tutors.

#### *USP/Teachers' College Partnerships*

At present USP has taken the lead in constructing the new programme and delivering it through the region's nine teachers' colleges. However, the colleges have built up a considerable body of knowledge around teacher training programmes over the years they have been operating. In each case the teachers' colleges have been delivering teacher training programmes for a much longer period than the university. It is here that the partnership aspect of the project is crucial. Meetings of college principals with USP personnel proved invaluable to the project writers in appreciating the body of professional knowledge that exists in each teachers' college. Because of the region's diversity—politically, socially, culturally, and economically—the work of teachers in each country varies tremendously.

The partnership between USP and the teachers' colleges is unique, in that the two parties could well be seen in some contexts as competitors. For example, in Australia, tertiary institutions have been pitted against each other in terms of their research and course offerings in

order to survive (Marginson, 2000). This is not the case within the Pacific region, but in the future a similar scenario could develop. At this stage USP's BEd is an in-service programme, one that most countries in the region do not offer, thus the partners are not direct competitors. However, things could change. At present Fulton College in Fiji offers a BEd programme at the pre-service level. Lautoka Teachers' College and other colleges are considering moving to a BEd programme at some time in the future. Fulton College and the Catholic-sponsored Corpus Christi in Suva also serve a particular system of schools, those run by the Seventh Day Adventist and Catholic churches respectively in the region. There is the possibility that conflicts over values may prevent close collaboration in future teacher training. Additionally, the Marshall Islands' college is bound by agreements with U.S. central government directives about forming partnerships with institutions outside of the United States. The externalisation process has moved very sensitively given these tensions.

The partnerships between USP and the region's teachers' colleges are important for keeping educational services within the region. Many teachers' colleges have been enticed into free-trade type relationships with New Zealand and Australian universities to upgrade staff qualifications, receive consultancies of various kinds, and gain material assistance. These relationships have traditionally been hard to resist when they come with large budgets and big promises of development, resources, and travel. These relationships also bring the potential for a diminishing of cultural autonomy and ownership of programmes. The Pacific's more critical educators question who really benefits

from such relationships (see Sanga, Chu, Hall, & Crowl, 2005; Sanga & Taufe'ulungaki, 2005). As mentioned earlier, institutions in Australia's tertiary sector battle to survive in a climate of ever-diminishing resources and enforced marketisation. Consultancy contracts in the Pacific won by Australian universities help keep those universities economically buoyant in tough times (Luteru & Teasdale, 1993; Baba, 1987). Forging closer ties between USP and the teachers' colleges, as the externalisation project has done, redirects spending to the region, as well as utilising local expertise and the often-desired local epistemologies that from a postcolonial perspective have never been fully recognised (Taufe'ulungaki, 2002, 2003; Thaman, 2002, 2003; Teairo, 2002).

#### *Course Articulation*

As mentioned previously, teachers with a qualification in teaching from their home country's institution and three years' teaching experience are able to enrol in the upgrade programme. They study part time and complete the programme in a three-year period. They are given one year's advanced standing toward the BEd degree. However, there has been a need for flexibility around the advanced standing, given the diversity of training experiences students bring to the upgrade. The region's nine teachers' colleges all differ in their own pre-service programmes, and these programmes also have differed over time. The face-to-face course offered within Fiji has attracted students who did their initial training more than 20 years ago. These students, in particular, bring to the degree a set of formal learning experiences that differ from those which a student brings who graduated from their teachers' college only three years before. A compulsory academic English course goes some way

to off-setting problems for teachers who are not familiar with the literacies required for university study.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The initiative taken by USP to convert the Bachelor of Education (primary) to distance mode is timely, because the Pacific region needs better-qualified primary teachers who will in turn contribute positively toward improving the quality of education at the primary level. The course materials utilise insider understandings of how adult Pacific students learn. We feel that the wider externalisation team, mentioned earlier, knows Pacific teachers better, including their particular needs and the unique challenges they face. Many of these challenges centre around the region's neo-colonial/globalising influences and the sometimes oppositional need to preserve and promote culturally sensitive Pacific knowledges, ways of teaching, and learning.

In addition, we would emphasise here the project's transformative potential. Teachers undertaking the programme in greater numbers will result in teacher-initiated change in their own practices and systems, either at the level of classroom teaching or in wider spheres of influence at the whole school, community, and national levels. Teachers are empowered to see themselves as agents of change, particularly in areas they perceive as important and relevant. This point is particularly pertinent in the Pacific region, where alternative teacher professional development opportunities are scarce and the status of teaching as a profession is not high.

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