

## Pre-service programme upgrading: A milestone achievement in primary teacher education for Fiji

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### Introduction/Background

The preparation of primary teachers commenced at Lautoka Teachers' College (LTC) in 1977. The College then became the second government owned primary teacher education institution in the country. Initially the college served dual roles, i.e. it carried out both in-service and pre-service training of teachers. Specifically LTC intended to:

- provide in-service and refresher courses for licensed teachers;
- offer a pre-service course to primary school teachers; and
- increase the workforce of trained teachers in order to:
- meet the demand for the annual increase in the teaching roll; and
- replace existing untrained teachers. (Fiji Ministry of Education, 1975:2).

In the early 1980s the government made a unilateral decision and closed its main teacher training institution, i.e. Nasinu Teachers' College (NTC). This college had been responsible for supplying the bulk of the teachers needed for the nation's primary schools. Due to its closure, all pre-service preparation of teachers was shifted to LTC. This left LTC as the sole government owned primary teacher education institution.

### Award

Upon completion of a two-year pre-service training program the graduates were awarded Certificates in Primary Teaching at NTC. Likewise, LTC has been awarding its graduates with Certificates in Primary Teaching since its inception in 1977. This has been the case at the Government owned teacher education institutions for over fifty years. LTC, alone has produced over three thousand primary teachers with Certificates in Primary Teaching (LTC Handbook, 2004). A Certificate in Primary Teaching is no longer recognised as a suitable qualification for teachers at the primary level. Better-qualified teachers are now needed to enhance the delivery of primary education to the nation's children and to meet the new demands of work and responsibilities.

### Significant Development

More recently, the government upon request sought assistance from Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) to strengthen the pre-service teacher education program at LTC. Funding of A\$5 million was provided for the Lautoka Teachers' College Upgrade Project (LTCUP), which began in November, 2002. The project has a number of objectives, key of which is reviewing and upgrading the current Certificate to a Diploma in Primary Teaching.

Other objectives of the project include:

- working with stakeholders to define the goals of LTC and to strengthen its operations;
- focusing on the preparation of teachers for small, rural and remote schools with multi-level classes;
- introducing a change in the LTC teaching-learning paradigm;
- developing a strategy for upgrading primary teachers who are already in the service;
- reviewing and strengthening the certificate level program in Special Education and Early Childhood Education;
- upgrading the College Staff;
- strengthening collaboration amongst the stakeholders and the target groups; and
- developing infrastructure.

The European Union (EU) has committed funds equivalent to F\$8.5 million for infrastructure development at the College. Some of the facilities to be constructed include a new hostel, offices for staff members, a library block and a lecture theatre. The provision of these physical facilities will facilitate teacher education activities at the College.

### **An Achievement**

Thus far, work on the key objective of upgrading from a Certificate to Diploma programme has progressed well. A draft of the proposed programme has been developed with contributions from various stakeholders. This has enhanced the review process. As a former Head of School of Education at LTC and presently a

representative of the University of the South Pacific in the review process, I consider the proposed changes to be worthwhile. In the proposed Diploma, for example, a course entitled *Program Planning in Multi-grade Classrooms* is incorporated. The inclusion of this course will help prospective teachers acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to cope with teaching in multi-grade contexts. The Certificate programme did not provide any professional preparation to teachers for multi-grade teaching. Multi-grade teaching exists in over 50 per cent of the primary schools in Fiji.

The current Certificate programme is also overloaded. As a result, trainees are engaged almost throughout the day in classes. Some rationalisation of the courses was considered necessary by the various stakeholders. In the proposed Diploma programme, students will be studying about six courses per semester, rather than almost nine courses in the present Certificate programme. One of the salient features of the new programme is the provision of ample opportunities for independent learning and reflection. The proposed programme is expected to strengthen the professional preparation of teachers for a wide range of work and responsibilities in school. The final programme will be in place in the not too distant future. It is envisaged that the intake for 2005 will be the pioneers of the Diploma in Primary Teaching programme.

### **Summary**

It is particularly difficult for a small developing nation like Fiji with limited financial resources to keep educational systems in pace with the changing times; in

fact Coombs (1969:7) stated, “Educating a nation, and keeping that nation’s educational system on step with the times, seems to be many times harder than putting a man on the moon”. The Ministry of Education together with the aid donors, i.e. AusAID and EU, need to be commended for their initiative to upgrade the pre-service programme to a Diploma level. The initiative is also timely because we need better-qualified teachers to meet the demands of work expected of them in the schools of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The implementation of the new programme will, therefore, be a milestone achievement for the College as well as the nation in terms of providing better qualified teachers for the primary schools.

### **Bibliography**

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Note:

<sup>1</sup> The author represented the University of the South Pacific in the review process and also served as a consultant for the Beginning Teaching Research Project at LTC. Views expressed in the paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of USP or the Fiji Ministry of Education.