In the Pacific, teaching and learning, and therefore teacher education, are facing an uncomfortable dilemma. On one side is the inheritance of outdated, cumbersome, colonial and neocolonial educational structures, ideologies, values and attitudes wherein curriculum, pedagogy and assessment continue to reflect twentieth century ways of knowing and doing. On the other side is the desire of governments to implement reforms they believe will bring their educational and economic systems on a par with the new realities of the global world.

Playing catch-up with the rest of the world, usually defined in Western terms, has never been easy and poses enormous challenges for Pacific countries with limited resources and small economies. These nations continue to struggle with issues associated with basic education provision, resource and infrastructural development, appropriate and coherent national curricula, retention of students in secondary schooling, access to higher education, indigenous education, provision of adequate rural services—in a nutshell, with quality education for their populations.

How can teacher training institutions and teacher professional development programmes deal with these tensions alongside the unprecedented changes brought about by a rapidly evolving technological and globalising landscape in the new knowledge economy? How can teacher development programmes and institutions prepare teachers, and therefore their students, for the demands and challenges of life and work in ‘New Times’ (Hall, 1996) in the twenty-first century? What local cultural responses should they make to these new conditions? Do Pacific Ministries of Education, policy makers, teacher educators and teachers have agency to make a significant contribution to a reconceptualised and more culturally appropriate education system?

In this chapter, I briefly discuss ten issues and challenges facing teacher education in the Pacific. The ideas are culled from my cumulative experience of over two decades of working in teacher education and in education in general in the Pacific region. The important question to ask is, which path should Pacific countries
take in their quest to have the best of both worlds? On the one hand is offered the possibility of an educational system and teacher education models that are solidly grounded and rooted in best traditional or indigenous cultural practices and epistemologies, on the other are ranged the best of the offerings of the West and the global world. Or perhaps, rather than ‘either . . . or’, we need to strive for some kind of blending or grafting of the best that each has to offer, to produce a system uniquely crafted to our particular needs and situations. In this way, and perhaps only in this way, can we make our education systems our own.

For the purposes of this chapter and the rest of this book, the term Pacific refers to the 14 independent (island) countries in the Pacific region, plus Tokelau (which is still undecided about its political status). This includes four larger nations: Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; seven not so large nations: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati, Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Sāmoa and Tonga; and four small island nations: Niue, Nauru, Tokelau and Tuvalu. From the smallest nation of Tokelau to the largest of Papua New Guinea, all these island countries are implementing many reforms, in an attempt to improve the quality of their education systems.

Issues and challenges in teacher education

Dismantling colonised mindsets
At the heart of any educational system are teachers and students engaging in the teaching and learning processes. The preparation of teachers, both pre-service and in-service, is vitally important if Pacific educational systems are to produce quality learning outcomes and if students are to attain an appropriate standard of success, however that might be defined. Given the historical past, a great challenge facing these countries today is that they have inherited all the ideological and physical structures, including the fact that instruction continues to be in the colonial language. Dismantling these structures or even finding alternatives has been difficult, given that these countries have not experienced anything different.

However, Pacific peoples would do well to recognise the important fact that they now have agency to do something about the situation and that they can utilise the resources available to them to do something for themselves by themselves.
Copycat mentality
It is an inescapable part of our historical experience over not quite two centuries that teacher education systems in Pacific countries have—like the overall education systems they serve—been modelled on Western systems, thus perpetuating the cycle of ‘copycating’ what happens in metropolitan countries. The uncritical acceptance and adoption of curricula, pedagogical approaches, assessment methods and field preparation principally derived from Western theories mean that Western theories of learning and teaching, psychology and assessment permeate teacher education institutions in the Pacific, without sufficient interrogation of their appropriateness to the Pacific contexts into which they are being so enthusiastically, even dogmatically, introduced and entrenched. Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner, Maslow and Gardiner continue to be served on a silver platter to student teachers in the Pacific, as the good and sufficient food for aspiring practitioners in this region. Similarly, practicum or teaching practice models are imported from another context.

Culture-sensitive pedagogy
As a result of the mimicking tendency, the pattern has been for teacher education/training programmes to resemble closely what happened in England, New Zealand, Australia or North America, in many cases one to three decades behind the peak of the wave in the country of origin, as if caught in a time warp. This has also meant, of course, that teacher education institutions and schools have not valued indigenous epistemologies, the culture and value systems of Pacific children. This in turn has contributed in significant ways to children’s perception of schools as alien and unfriendly places, offering seemingly irrelevant content and employing practices that marginalise and lead to underachievement (against a narrow definition of achievement as passes in local and national examinations). The recognition of the need for a culture-sensitive pedagogy, in teacher education programmes as in schools, is crucial.

Aid dependency
Pacific educational systems, including teacher education institutions, have been major beneficiaries of assistance from their developmental partners. The concomitant influence of the aid donors has shaped the whole educational range: curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, resources, you name it. Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau, for example, have systems similar to those in New Zealand. Nauru is trialling a curriculum first developed in Queensland schools while Fiji, through
the current Australian Assistance for International Development (AusAID) programme, is in the process of following the New South Wales outcomes-based education approach. The Marshall Islands, FSM and Palau continue to be influenced by educational thinking and programme models from the United States of America.

It is obvious that in a particular recipient country, whichever donor partner is the flavour of the year in the Ministry of Education will determine the kind of curriculum that country will follow at that time. Then when another donor comes along, the country changes tack and gives another reform package a trial. Some countries are taking the lead, however, in making alterations that work to contextualise reform agendas, in an attempt to localise such things as content and desired results. It is imperative that Pacific countries stand back and reflect on exactly what kind of children they would like their educational systems to ‘produce’. They need to work backwards from the final result they wish for, as they work out the steps by which they hope to achieve that outcome; the risk that their vision will be swamped by the different reform agendas of their development partners is otherwise too great. They need to make sure that they ‘own’ the reform process, are active participants and have a clear sense of what direction they want their country to pursue in the sphere of education. They need to ensure also that their educational systems are firmly grounded in their own epistemologies, cultural values and languages, while taking on the best of what the regional and global experiences have to offer.

Shortage of appropriately trained teachers

There is no escaping the fact that there is a shortage of experienced, appropriately trained teachers in many Pacific countries. Nauru, for example, has a significant proportion of teachers at secondary level who have had no training in teaching methods, in what and how to teach. The situation is so desperate that primary trained teachers are ‘promoted’ to be secondary school teachers without the requisite knowledge and pedagogical skills. Another measure to counter the shortage of appropriately trained teachers is exemplified in Nauru’s recruitment of trained teachers from other countries in the Pacific.

Pacific education systems face another challenge in the recruitment into secondary schools of teachers who lack the requisite teacher training qualifications although they may have attained a degree in appropriate content subjects. This situation is
akin to the erroneous expectation that a driver, qualified to drive a car, will also be able to repair the car when it breaks down, without the relevant knowledge and skills to do so. This has had serious policy and pedagogical implications, as well as marked negative effects on the quality of student learning and enthusiasm.

Moral or values education
Pacific teacher education, and therefore Pacific schools, face yet another serious issue in the area of values education. In these new times of rapid social, cultural, political, economic and technological change, we cannot afford to ignore the importance, in school as in life, of fostering the ability to make moral and ethical judgments and decisions. Student teachers and by necessity, classroom students, will need to be guided into making sound moral and ethical choices in everything they do, whether in or outside the classroom. While the family, as the basic social unit of society, and the church can and do play significant roles in this area, their impact can all too easily be neutralised by the changing dynamics brought about by such inescapable phenomena as urbanisation, globalisation and changing economic structures, including high levels of poverty and unemployment, and the differential impact of these things across the generations. It is therefore imperative that schools also take the lead in ‘teaching’ and ‘practising’ sound moral values. The building of character through moral education should be strongly emphasised in school organisation and curriculum so that upright, law-abiding citizens are produced who can live lives of moral significance.

In this conception, teachers have to lead by example. Since it is in the nature of things that they are role models to their pupils, let them be exemplary ones, if they are to facilitate moral and ethical decision-making on the part of their students. To make a positive impact, they must themselves be culturally and spiritually grounded. If they are unable to provide moral and ethical leadership in the classroom, their role as ‘teacher’, facilitator and guide will not be effectively fulfilled. Teacher training institutions must develop appropriate programmes that foster the development of teachers of integrity and sound character, who in turn will be able to guide their students into making admirable moral and ethical choices in their learning and living.

Teaching conditions
To talk about teacher education without a mention of the conditions of their teaching service does not make good sense. An inescapable fact in the Pacific (as
no doubt elsewhere) is that teachers are overworked and underpaid. Unreasonable demands and pressures are laid on their shoulders, particularly in light of the appalling living conditions they sometimes find themselves in, more so when they are transferred to rural or island communities where the living standard is generally lesser than in urban centres.

It is up to policy makers to ensure that teachers are treated well, so that they can give of their best in the classrooms and communities. For example, in Fiji incentive allowances have been paid out, though the amount is a token one. In principle, teaching conditions need careful rethinking, since countries depend on the teachers to provide quality education for their children and to bear so much of the responsibility for the formation of worthy and fulfilled future citizens.

Teacher induction

Another area of great concern is the need to have newly trained, inexperienced and beginning teachers undergo an intensive induction programme when they join their first school. No country in the Pacific presently has in place a national policy on new teacher induction or mentoring; this situation needs to be rectified, for quite apart from the personal misery this can occasion the neophyte teachers, the students are ultimately the ones who will suffer the consequences of inadequate support for beginning teachers.

Ongoing professional development

It is not unusual in the Pacific for teachers, once trained, to be given no or few further opportunities for upgrading of their knowledge or skills, for the duration of their teaching careers. In Fiji, for example, primary teachers posted in either rural or urban schools commonly undergo no refresher courses for a very long time. They are, at most, required to attend short, narrowly focused in-service training courses only when changes are made to curricula. This has serious implications for the level of their enthusiasm and the calibre of their teaching, not to mention the quality of their students’ learning.

It is imperative that Ministries of Education devise policies and strategies whereby the skills of their teachers are continually developed and upgraded in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in their respective fields. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to become lifelong learners not only for their own satisfaction and personal enrichment, but also to attempt to upgrade their qualifications to the highest possible level.
An area often neglected is that of ongoing professional development at the local or school level. School principals and heads of teacher education organisations must themselves have their leadership capacities expanded, strengthened and supported, if they are to provide high quality in-house staff professional development programmes for the teachers. Improvements in quality do not occur by chance; they require informed, skilled, dedicated attention.

Teacher education and educational reform
Teacher educators ought also to be updated or ‘kept in the loop’ whenever there is any new reform initiative developed from the centre, that is, from Ministries or Departments of Education. They also need help in keeping abreast of the latest theories and ideas about learning and pedagogical changes. A classroom practitioner may have little ‘spare’ time and only limited access to the resources where the results of this type of thinking are reported; the ministries should be major channels for the flow of information.

In many Pacific countries, teacher education institutions are usually the last to be informed of any new reform agenda. The most that might happen is a cursory mention, in a common circular sent to both primary and secondary schools, of any new developments; no further thought or instruction is given to teacher education institutions about considering the implications for their own teaching programmes and practice.

There needs, therefore, to be better communication and coordination between Ministries of Education and teacher education institutions on educational reforms or any international developments of significance to teaching and learning. How many teacher educators, and consequently, trained teachers, in the Pacific know of the most recent educational reform at the national level or are familiar with regional conventions like the Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP) or even international agreements like UNESCO’s Education for All (EFA) initiative, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Education for Sustainable Development and so forth? This situation needs urgent attention.

Reference