Fitness for Purpose, Fitness of Purpose: The Case of Teacher Education

Asia-Pacific Quality Network Annual Conference, Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Expectations and Achievements, Bangalore, India, 2-4 March 2011

Keynote address: Fitness for Purpose, Fitness of Purpose: The Case of Teacher Education

By Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

Abstract

After the challenge of providing secondary education to the 400 million children between the ages of 12 and 17 who do not now receive it, expanding the supply of teachers and improving the quality of their training is the world’s biggest educational challenge. Some 10 million more teachers will be required in the coming decade and, since many of the 75 million teachers already in place have only the most rudimentary training, there is a massive task of in-service training as well.

The paper reviews two aspects of the provision of teacher education, making it fit for purpose as well as fit of purpose. First, how can we improve the quality of all forms of teacher education: pre-service and in-service; initial training and continuing professional development. The Toolkit for Quality Assurance in Teacher Education produced by NAAC and COL is having a positive impact in various jurisdictions.

Drawing on his recent book, Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All, the author will then ask whether current approaches to teacher education can be described as ‘fit of purpose’. Are they addressing teachers’ real needs and are they likely to promote the ultimate outcome of better learning by the children they teach? He argues that the focus of effort in teacher education should be switched from long largely theoretical pre-service programmes to shorter but regular in-service programmes that address the reality of the classroom. In this context ICTs can greatly enrich the distance learning methods required. Open educational resources, of which the large-scale programme of Teacher Education in sub-Saharan Africa, TESSA, is an excellent example, can make an important contribution.

Introduction

The Commonwealth of Learning is delighted to participate in this conference of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network at the National Assessment and Accreditation Council. I am sorry to be here on my own from
COL and gratefully acknowledge the help of my two colleagues Abdurrahman Umar, our specialist for Teacher Education, and Madhulika Kaushik, COL’s new specialist for Higher Education, in preparing these remarks.

The NAAC and COL are partners of long standing and I was honoured to be present when NAAC celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2005. I am a regular visitor to Bangalore and it is good to be back again. COL admires greatly what NAAC has accomplished and I congratulate Professor Ranganath and all the NAAC staff on the leadership role they are playing in India. NAAC’s impact is being felt around the world because of the thoughtful way in which it approaches quality assurance and assessment and because of the huge scale of its operation.

My association with APQN is more recent and came about because I am a member of the Steering Committee of GIQAC, the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity. This is a joint programme of the World Bank, which provides the funds, and UNESCO which administers them. GIQAC’s purpose is to work through the regional networks of quality assurance agencies, such as APQN, to spread good practice and strengthen the weaker agencies by sharing experience and expertise.

I said ‘such as APQN’ but I quickly realised, on joining the GOQAC Steering Committee, that APQN is the star pupil among the regional networks, the one that we cite as a model for the others, and the one whose annual proposals and reports are exemplars for others to follow. So it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to work alongside APQN colleagues for a few days at this conference.

In my talk today I shall focus on teacher education for two reasons. First, because it has been the focus of a multi-year partnership with NAAC and a number of Commonwealth countries. It has been one of the most successful partnerships COL has ever undertaken. An important product of the partnership was a Quality Assurance Toolkit for Teacher Education which is having a very positive impact.

Thanks in part to the excellent work of Professor Uma Coomaraswamy in Sri Lanka and the collaboration of UNESCO this toolkit has been extended into a more general Quality Assurance Toolkit for Higher Education with a special focus on distance education.

My second reason for concentrating on teacher education is that after the challenge of providing secondary education to the 400 million children between the ages of 12 and 17 who do not now receive it, expanding the supply of teachers and improving the quality of their training is the world’s biggest educational challenge. UNESCO forecast that 10 million more teachers would be required between 2007 and 2015. Furthermore, since many of the 75 million teachers already in place have only the most rudimentary training, there is a massive task of in-service training as well. The education of teachers is the most crucial current issue that links school education and higher education worldwide.

The Teacher Education Challenge

If it is to achieve the goal of Universal Primary Education, let alone expand secondary education and fulfill the broader agenda defined by the six goals of Dakar, the world must recruit, train and provide professional development for millions of teachers. It is a challenge of quantity and quality.
The challenge of quantity is breathtaking. Africa alone needs many million new teachers by 2015. Conventional methods of teacher education in college and university classrooms simply cannot address the scale of the challenge. This, of course, is just one subset of the larger challenge of rapidly expanding higher education systems all over the developing world.

In a speech that I made here at NAAC five years ago I said that ‘it seemed as if an earlier forecast of 120 million tertiary students worldwide by 2020 would be hit well before that, maybe even by 2010’. I was way off. In fact there were already 150 million tertiary students globally in 2007, a 53% increase over 2000. It seems that you cannot overestimate the growth of tertiary education, not least in this region served by APQN.

The challenge of quality is just as great, for higher education generally and for teacher education. Quality schooling, whether carried out in classrooms or in open schools, requires quality teachers. Parents and children are quick to notice if teachers are not up to their task. If the opportunity cost of going to school is significant many children will simply stop attending if teaching is poor. Parents will cease to believe that education is the route to a better life and the drive to get all children to complete basic education will falter.

This would be a tragedy because an education of quality is the route to a better life. It is the ladder that leads to increasing freedom; and freedom, as Amartya Sen argues so persuasively, is the measure of development. And not only the measure of development but also the primary means of development because it is free people, freed by education and acting as free agents, that nurture the development of families, of communities and of nations.

So we have a challenge of quantity and a challenge of quality. COL is helping the governments of the Commonwealth to increase the quantity of teachers by showing how conventional teacher education institutions can become dual-mode institutions and greatly increase the scale of their operations. We also continue to foster the development of open universities, which have made a stellar contribution to the education and professional development of Commonwealth teachers for nearly half a century.

I have entitled this address Fitness for Purpose, Fitness of Purpose: The Case of Teacher Education and as that title suggests, it is in two parts.

Fitness for purpose – my Open University colleagues used to say ‘fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society’ – is one of the earliest and most durable definitions of quality. It was only somewhat later than governments and others began to mutter than fitness for purpose was all very well, but what if the purpose itself was inappropriate, unambitious or irrelevant to student needs?

Fitness for Purpose

We shall come to fitness of purpose in a minute let me start with fitness for purpose. You are all experts on quality and its assurance. My first purpose in this section is to suggest that it is possible to have common criteria for quality across different tertiary education programmes and different modes of delivery. Second, I want to alert you to a toolkit for quality assurance in teacher education that can help you in this area.
Let us start the review of quality criteria by looking at the criteria that NAAC uses for assessing the quality of institutions and programmes.

NAAC uses seven criteria:

- Curricular Aspects
- Teaching-Learning and Evaluation
- Research, Consultancy and Extension
- Infrastructure and Learning Resources
- Student Support and Progression
- Organisation and Management
- Healthy Practices

If you compare these criteria with the six used by the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the 1990s you see considerable similarity:

- Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment
- Student Progression and Achievement
- Learning Resources
- Student Support and Guidance
- Quality Management and Enhancement

Starting in 2006, COL and NAAC convened experts from 36 institutions in Australia, Bangladesh, Botswana, Canada, India, Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Uganda, the United Kingdom and Zambia to develop quality indicators for teacher education. They had access to these criteria but had to make judgements about their appropriateness. They came up with the following list:

- Curriculum Design and Planning
- Curriculum Transaction and Evaluation
- Student Support and Progression
- Research, Development and Extension
- Infrastructure and Learning Resources
• Organisation and Management

This seems to show that there is pretty wide agreement on the criteria for quality in higher education in general and teacher education in particular. Note that the NAAC-COL group was looking for criteria that would apply equally to face-to-face and distance education, which means that at the level of criteria for quality there is a high degree of commonality between higher education in general and teacher education in particular, whatever the mode of delivery.

The toolkit was completed in 2007 and has been widely used. For example, the National Council of Colleges of Education in Nigeria adapted its indicators for its quality assurance framework and similar adoption has taken place in Jamaica.

I noted earlier that under the leadership of Sri Lanka’s Professor Uma Coomaraswamy and with the support of UNESCO the Teacher Education Toolkit has been adapted to create a QA Toolkit for Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes.

At a Roundtable in Colombo last August representatives from Jamaica and Thailand joined the original developers in assessing their use of these toolkits as well as the COL-RIM quality-improvement tool that I spoke about at a workshop here yesterday.

The role of delegates from institutions that have used one of these COL QA instruments was to outline how they were implemented in their institutions and the results achieved. As well as informing other delegates who are looking such toolkits the discussions fed into COL’s Monitoring and Evaluation system, giving us some sense of how well these toolkits are working, who is using them and under what circumstances.

This is not the place to go into detail about the content of the toolkits. Suffice it to say that within each of the six Key Areas listed, 25 Quality Aspects, covering most of the transactional and functional aspects of a TE programme were identified. Each of the 25 Quality Aspects were broken down into Quality Indicators. 75 Quality Indicators were developed, each accompanied by an operational definition, a commentary on its importance and potential sources of evidence for it.

Please apply to NAAC if you would like to get hold of a copy of the toolkit.

Fitness of Purpose

Those are my comments on fitness for purpose. The second part of my talk is about fitness of purpose. I shall examine the purposes of teacher education and argue – along with many others – that they need radical revision.

I have explored this issue at greater length, with examples, in my recent book Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All, which has also been published in Chinese with the title the other way around: Achieving Education for All: Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers.
In the book I focus on two related aspects of teacher education. First, how can we recruit and train more teachers more rapidly? Second, what kind of training is best suited to the needs of the second decade of the 21st century?

Teacher recruitment

First, I make a few comments on teacher recruitment. As we might expect, there is a three-way correlation between the status of the teaching profession in a country, the performance of its schools and children, and the ease of recruiting able people as teachers. In some countries teacher recruitment and retention is not a major issue. Teaching is a high status profession and most of these countries score highly on international surveys of pupil performance such as PISA.

Sadly, however, the status of teaching is declining in most countries and the blame for this lies with both teachers and governments. Where teacher absenteeism is endemic the public will not admire teachers. Where governments have eroded teachers’ salaries and teacher deployment is a corrupt process good people will not be attracted to the profession.

A century ago the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1903) made the oft-repeated remark that ‘those who can do; those who can’t teach’. But today’s knowledge economy has stood that comment on its head. The training and skills that teachers acquire are highly valued in the contemporary labour market. Indeed, the UK’s Secret Intelligence Service, MI5, advertised for teachers this year, seeking their ‘relationship-building skills’. The combination of the low status of the profession and the attractiveness of teachers’ skills in the wider labour market explains why 50% of teachers in the US leave the profession within five years of completing their training (UNESCO, 2007b, p. 130).

Faced with the problem of teacher shortage and the necessity of putting an adult in front of each class of children, at least in primary school, many governments have had to resort to employing untrained teachers. Until recently, for example, there were 30,000 untrained teachers in California’s schools.

However, sending people into the classroom with minimal initial training can be a very good strategy for our times if they are then provided with appropriate on-the-job training.

Two interesting examples of this from developed countries are the Teach for America programme in the US and the Teach First programme in the UK. These programmes recruit the best graduates they can find, ask them to make a two-year commitment to teaching, and send them into the classroom, often in the toughest schools, with just a minimal orientation beforehand. These highly qualified graduates are positively attracted by the description of teaching, in the advertisements, as ‘tough and demanding’. Conversely they are put off by the standard one-year postgraduate route into teaching as ‘too slow’, ‘too theoretical’ and ‘too boring’, although they did value this training once they had experience of the classroom.

These examples of putting unqualified teachers straight into the classroom in developing countries and doing the same with good graduates in developed countries suggest that teacher education needs radical revision.

Teacher Education
Most current teacher education policy fails to address the crisis of teacher recruitment, is poorly coordinated with school systems, and does not recognise that technology allows us to do things differently.

First, teacher education tends to on long programmes of pre-service training whereas the emphasis should be on shorter and recurring programmes of continuous professional learning.

Second, continuing professional development is carried out without reference to school needs and encourages teachers to move jobs instead of becoming more effective.

Third, teacher education often ignores the development of distance learning enhanced by ICTs and Open Educational Resources although distance learning is the only way to conduct classroom-focused continuous professional development.

Today distance learning cannot be ignored because it provides the only way of addressing the two central requirements of teacher education just identified: the emphasis on continuing professional development and the focus on the teacher in the classroom. These requirements complement each other. Any form of continuous professional development that involves bringing teachers regularly to institutions in the towns is inherently expensive and inconvenient. Furthermore, research shows that this kind of professional development has little impact on their performance as teachers.

The locus of continuous professional learning must be the school and its focus must be the classroom. This has always been the strength of distance learning systems for teacher education.

Let me conclude with an example, a programme of Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa abbreviated as TESSA. There are profiles of this and other programmes of teacher education by distance learning in my book.

TESSA is a consortium of 13 African universities, the UK Open University and five international organisations including COL. It works across nine African countries – with more participating informally – by creating teacher education materials in Arabic, English, French and Kiswahili. Last year nearly half a million African teachers worked with materials and resources produced through the TESSA community. Since these are classroom-based in-service materials they have a direct impact on millions of children through their use in the classroom. Because they are open educational resources, countries, institutions and schools can adapt them to their needs.

To sum up my comments on the fitness of purpose of teacher education, it needs radical rethinking – and not just in developing countries. The policy should be to put teachers into schools with the minimum training necessary for them to function, and then to concentrate the major resources of teacher education on recurrent in-service programmes of professional learning that are resolutely based on school practice and the classroom experience.

Once that paradigm shift is made, all teacher education institutions will have to give themselves the capability to offer distance learning programmes in order to reach teachers in their schools.
Conclusion

That conclusion brings me back to my earlier remarks about fitness for purpose.

The Quality Assurance Toolkits developed by NAAC and COL that I described earlier can help you ensure quality in all teacher education and higher education programmes, no matter what their mode of delivery. I commend them to you.