MALAYSIAN TEACHER EDUCATION INTO THE NEW CENTURY

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1. INTRODUCTION

As in most centralized systems, the pattern of teacher education in Malaysia is closely related to the development of the national education system, which in turn is strongly influenced by the socio-economic and political changes of the country. The recruitment of trainee teachers, the length of training, and the content and methods of training tend to vary with the changing needs of the school system. In the early years of independence, when the school system underwent fast expansion during the 1960s and 1970s, there was an urgent need to recruit enough teachers to staff the newly built classrooms. To ease the acute shortage of teachers in primary schools, many untrained teachers with academic qualifications as low as Form 3 (which is equivalent to nine years of general education) were recruited and given part-time training during the weekends and school holidays in training colleges and regional training centers. To staff the secondary schools, many graduate teachers were imported from the United Kingdom and India. During those years, the number of teacher training colleges in the country was very limited: up to 1976, there were only three teacher colleges and ten training centers for the training of primary school teachers, and five other colleges for training secondary school teachers (Wong & Chang, 1975).

After the initial quantitative expansion of schools to cater for all school-going age children, more attention were given to the quality of education which largely depends on the professionalism and commitment of the teachers. As from 1967, all trainee teachers must have the minimum academic qualification of a School Certificate, which is equivalent to an O-level obtained after 11 years of general education. The Ministry of Education also took step to restructure the teacher-training program by integrating the primary and secondary teacher colleges into one common institution providing a common core curriculum with electives to enable trainees to specialize in either primary or secondary teaching (Wong, 1977). The 1980s also witnessed an increase in the number of teacher training colleges. At the same time, more public universities were established and, in each of these universities, there is a faculty/school of education, which takes on the responsibilities of training graduate teachers for secondary schools.
The goals of teacher education have changed over the years according to the pressing needs of the education system. Consequently, different types of teacher-education programs have been developed to cater for the following priorities at different points in time:

a) to ensure that enough teachers of the various level needed by the schools are recruited and trained;
b) to raise the quality of teachers;
c) to train enough teachers in specialized subjects like English, science, and mathematics;
d) to provide sufficient trained teachers for vocational and technical schools;
e) to provide in-service training for upgrading, as well as the professional development of, practicing teachers; and
f) to provide professional training for all kinds of practitioners in the education system, including school counselors, school principals, teacher educators, curriculum developers, and others.

The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of the pattern of teacher education in Malaysia, highlighting some of the current problems and challenges relating to this area of educational development. The overview is followed by a discussion on recent teacher education reforms in terms of selection and recruitment, length of training, content and methods of training. The analysis on the approaches to teacher education shows that there is a shift from the technical-rational approach to a reflective practitioner approach.

2. OVERVIEW OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Malaysian teacher education for pre-service teachers takes place at two levels, with the training of non-graduate teachers in the teacher training colleges and the training of graduate teachers in the universities (Lee, 1996). There are 27 teacher training colleges preparing teachers for both the primary and lower secondary schools. The admission requirement to these training colleges was an equivalent O-level (that is, a Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia obtained after five years of secondary education), but now it is slowly being raised to an equivalent of A-level (that is, a Sijil Pelajaran Tinggi Malaysia after seven years of secondary education). Since 1996, the training period has been lengthened from two and a half years to three years, leading to a Diploma in Teaching instead of a Certificate of Teaching. The total student enrolment in these 27 colleges was 17,766 in 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2001). All the colleges follow a common curriculum, which adopts a generalist approach for primary school teachers and subject specialization for teachers at the lower secondary level (Ministry of Education, 1991). As Abdul Rafie (1999) reported, there are six components in the teacher-training curriculum as follows.

a) Teacher Dynamics - language skills, thinking skills, Islamic education/Moral education, Islamic civilization, and environmental education.
b) Knowledge and Professional Competence - education in Malaysia, psychology, pedagogy, and guidance and counseling.