

# TEACHING PRACTICUM: BUILDING A UNIVERSITY -SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

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## **Abstract**

Teaching practicum plays a significant role in teacher education programmes and helps to upgrade the professional capacities and competencies of student teachers. The primary goal of teaching practicum is to provide student teachers within a classroom setting. The Teaching practicum is considered a vital component of all the teacher education programmes offered by all the departments of the Faculty of Education, of the Open University of Sri Lanka. Although it has been given considerable volume of attention for the teaching practicum, it is being identified that, an intentional and strategic effort has not been taken to build and uphold sound university- school partnership to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of teaching practicum. As mentioned by Lynch et.al (2012), As initial teacher education students transition to the profession, the experiences offered by the university and partner institutions require intentional, careful, and strategic planning, to ensure positive relational, organizational, and pedagogical experiences for all stakeholders. As emphasized by much empirical research, many countries have developed their own models to build and ensure university-school partnership. The university-school partnership has become a powerful model of professional development. Examples include the professional development school (PDS) movement in the USA (Linn, 2000), the partnership between higher education institutions and schools for initial teacher education as mandated in England and Wales (Department of Education and Science, 1992), and the innovative Links Projects in Australia (Yeatman & Sachs, 1995). the framing of strong, valuable, and effective partnerships that capitalize on the differing strengths of universities and schools in shaping quality teachers. According to Hammond and et.al (2012), Partnerships that incorporate the community, school, and university are becoming increasingly significant in teacher education programs and are thought to be significant in addressing teacher quality. Hence, university-school partnerships have become important for professional development and educational reform. Adopting a qualitative research paradigm, current study aimed to investigate the possibilities of introducing one such university-school partnership model to the teaching practicum components of the faculty of Education to improve the efficacy of all teacher education programme. The data were collected through focused group discussion of school mentors, master teachers, and university academics were analysed through thematic content analysis. Findings revealed that, more important and ground-breaking strategies have been presented by the relevant stakeholders to stablish and maintain strong university- school partnership aiming an efficient and effective teaching practicum. Based on the strategies, it was able to conceptualize the outcome-based framework/model to build university-school partnership in relation to the teaching practicum of all teacher education programmes delivered by the faculty of education, OUSL.

Keywords: - Professional development, Teacher Education, Teaching Practicum, professional competencies. School-university partnership

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## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the main purposes of teaching practicum is strengths in the areas of teaching strategies, critical thinking skills and professional and pedagogical knowledge among the student teachers. Accordingly, the teaching practicum period is considered as a very crucial induction process which needs to be seriously considered by any teacher education programme.

The faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka conducts undergraduate degree programmes and postgraduate diploma programmes, which the teaching practicum component is included. Under the Bachelor of Education (honors) degree programmes, currently four degree programs are conducted such as B.Ed in Drama and Theater, B.Ed in Natural Science, B.Ed in Special Needs and B.Ed in Primary Education. Under the post graduate diploma programmes, two programs are conducted such as Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) and Post Graduate Diploma in Special Needs Education (PGDSNE).

Both undergraduate and post graduate diploma programmes are conducting through the open and distance mode with the aim of improving the professional competencies and capacities of graduate teachers in the school system and novice student teachers who aimed to enroll to the teaching profession after completing their academic programme. As Kiggundu and Nayimully (2009) emphasized, teaching practice is an important component for becoming a teacher. Accordingly, the teaching practicum is a major component of both academic programmes and it is conducted in two stages. The stage- I of the PGDE programmes takes place at student teachers' own schools for a period of ten (10) weeks. Student teachers those who are following B.Ed degree programmes which were mentioned above are required to find out relevant schools to complete their stage- I of teaching practicum with or without the support of the relevant department, faculty, or university. Specific assessors' (Master teachers) are assessed the performance of stage -I teaching practicum of both programmes.

Stage -II of teaching practicum is common for both programmes delivered by all departments of the faculty. Student teachers of both programmes are required to complete their teaching practicum in selected schools prescribed by the relevant departments and evaluation part will be completed by the university academics or selected external examiners.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

**Teacher Education:** Teacher education can provide teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary for a lifetime of teaching. The teacher education and professional development of every teacher needs to be seen as a lifelong task and be structured and resourced accordingly. As Donaldson (2010) mentioned the period of initial teacher education, induction and the early years of employment lay the foundations of a teaching force and this vital early phase in the development of new teachers must be relevant, coherent and of high quality.

**Teaching Practicum:** Teaching practicum plays a significant role in every teacher education programmes in the world and it helps to upgrade the professional capacities and competencies of student teachers. Crookes (2003) defines the teaching practicum as 'a short-term, intensive opportunity for professional growth, occurring under relatively favorable institutional conditions. Accordingly teaching practicum develops a more complex knowledge base and

more challenging goals for student learning, it is increasingly important that the transition into teaching be a carefully staged process, as with internships in most professions. Marais and Meier (2004) note that “the term teaching practicum represents the range of experiences to which student teachers are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools.” It is an integral component of teacher education and refers to students’ placements to schools to practice lesson planning, classroom organization and management and most importantly classroom teaching.

**Teacher Professional development:** As mentioned by Lynch et.al (2012), As initial teacher education students transition to the profession, the experiences offered by the university and partner institutions require intentional, careful, and strategic planning, to ensure positive relational, organizational, and pedagogical experiences for all stakeholders. The transition from pre-service teacher to professional has long been acknowledged to require targeted support (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003; American Federation of Teachers, 2012; Kelley, 2004). This transition involves the process of being socialized into a new school environment as well as growing and adjusting to the expectations of a new professional role (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011)

**School-university partnership:** empirically, it has been identified that, to provide sound teaching practicum experience to the student teachers efficient and effective collaborative arrangement is needed. According to Sharon and Chan (2012) The traditional view of university as a place for one-off training is now considered outdated. Instead, the strong focus on lifelong learning urges teachers, educators, and academics to reconceptualize and transform education. In this new era, successful schools adopt outreach strategies and seek support from external agencies such as universities for their development. Institutions of higher education provide consultation or work with partner schools for collaborative sharing, reflection, research, and growth. As mentioned by Handler and Ravid (2001) emphasized, Schools and universities enter into a collaborative arrangement in which they are equal partners working to meet common interest. For this movement, some countries have specially created Professional Development Schools (PDS) in USA build effective university-school partnership. According to Handler and Ravid (2001), the PDS model is collaboration between a university and PDSs, with the main purpose on pre-service teacher education. Both a formal and informal relationship between the school and the university may emerge.

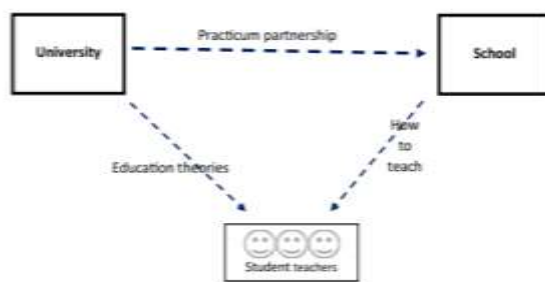


Figure 1: PDS Model for university-school practicum partnership

Source: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-020-00171-3>

Many researchers identified that building sound university-school practicum partnership is as a difficult and challenging task. The development of an appropriate mode of collaboration remains a challenge for successful school–university partnerships. In the sense, commitment of both parties is essential to build the sound university-school partnership. Then the stakeholders of universities and schools should have a vision to move beyond the existing research focus to explore ways to build school–university partnership. As cited by Bernay and et.al (2020), research over the past 20 years outlines elements of an effective school–university partnership model, with a focus on one essential critical feature: student teachers’

teaching practice improves mostly through a practicum/apprentice model, and particularly when delivered through school–university partnerships (Darling-Hammond,2006). As Donaldson emphasized, Current experiments involving a more intensive relationship between a university and identified schools, analogous to teaching hospitals, should be pursued as possible models of practice more generally. Joint appointments between schools and universities, for example, would provide a very tangible form of partnership as a practical expression of the theory/practice relationship. This joint appointment is described in figure 2.



Figure 2- university-school partnership

Source: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-020-00171-3>

The creation of a network of such ‘hub school’ partnerships across all authorities and also involving national agencies would enable much more direct engagement of university staff in school practice, with research as an integral part of this strengthened partnership rather than as something which sits apart.

## METHODOLOGY

Current study aimed to investigate the possibilities of introducing one university-school partnership model to the teaching practicum components of the faculty of Education to improve the efficacy of all teacher education programme. Accordingly, the following three research questions were formulated to guide the current study.

### *Research Questions*

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Identifying the existing framework of teaching practicum system adapted by the Faculty of Education.
2. What are the strategies and innovative methods that can be adapted to improve the quality of teaching practicum.
3. How and to what extent a school–university partnership can be built within a new framework/model.

### *Research Design*

Proposed study aims at examining how school–university partnership can be built within a new framework/model to improve the quality of teaching practicum of all teacher education programmes offered by the faculty of education. A qualitative research approach was employed in this study. Accordingly, the qualitative approach was taken in the analysis of data based on thematic categorizing. documentary analysis was done to fulfil the requirement of research question one (1). Data collected from of focus group discussion of master teachers, and university academics were analyzed using thematic approach to address research question no two (2). Based on stakeholder’s views, new framework /model for university-school partnership was developed to standardize the quality

of teaching practicum of all teacher education programmes to establish a framework or model to fulfil the requirement of question no three (3).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **RQ1- 1. Identifying the existing framework of teaching practicum system adapted by the Faculty of Education.**

Teaching practicum is a major component of both academic programmes such as Post Graduate Diploma and Undergraduate programmes and BEd programmes. This practicum is conducted mainly in two stages. The stage- I of PGDE programmes takes place at student teachers' own schools for a period of ten (10) weeks with the guidance and support of school mentor which selected by teacher students under the recommendation of head of the school. Student teachers those who are following bachelor's degree programmes are required to find out relevant schools to complete their stage- I of teaching practicum with or without the support of the relevant department, faculty, or university. This group of students was also required to complete their teaching practicum for a period of ten (10) weeks with the guidance and support of school mentor. The following table number 1 shows the existing framework of the teaching practicum.

Table 1-Existing framework of teaching practicum adapted by the Faculty of Education.

Indications	Teaching Practicum: Postgraduate Diploma Programmes	Teaching Practicum: Undergraduate Programmes
<b>Stage -I</b>		
Duration	10 Weeks	10 Weeks
Placement	Teacher Student's own school	Selected school by Student Teacher
Assessment and evaluation	5 lessons of each teacher students evaluated by prescribed master teacher	5 lessons of each teacher students assessed by prescribed master teacher
Special requirement	Completion of a school-based project	Completion of a school-based research project
<b>Stage -II</b>		
Placement	Selected school prescribed by examiner	Selected school prescribed by examiner

Specific assessors (Master teachers) are appointed by the relevant departments to assess the performance of stage -I teaching practicum of both groups such as PGDE and BEd. Completion of a school-based project or school-based research project by each student teacher is another special requirement during this teaching practicum stage -I of both programmes. Accordingly, the current practices and the framework is structured to facilitate student teachers to gain sufficient practical exposure through practicum.

### **RQ1- 2. What are the strategies and innovative methods that can be adapted to improve the quality of teaching practicum.**

During the focused-group discussion, the evaluators/examiners of the teaching practicum pointed out the following difficulties were encountered by them due to the unavailability of sound university-school partnership. Those difficulties are given in table two below.

**Table 2: Difficulties faced by evaluators/examiners during teaching practicum.**

No	Difficulties
1	Lack of awareness of Principals about the teaching practicum of teacher education programmes delivered by university and its necessity for professional development of teacher students due to poor communication of university. (Master teachers)
2	According to some principals, facilitating university teaching practicum is disturbing their normal school activities (Master teachers)
3	Wrong ideology of university authority as finding schools for teaching practicum stage-II is a sole responsibility of examiner.  <i>“ we have to go thee-four times to meet principal to get the permission to complete teaching practicum stage -II, some principals are rejected the request mentioning various reasons”</i> (University Examiner A)

According to table 2, examiners are facing various challenges and issues such as lack of awareness of Principals about the teaching practicum, negative attitude of principals' about teaching practicum, and rejecting approval of teaching practicum with regard to the insufficient university-school partnership. Based on their viewpoints, through focus group discussions enabled to generate alternative strategies to improve the outcome-based results in conceptualizing a new framework. Suggested strategies are mentioned in the following table number 3.

**Table 3: Strategies suggested by stakeholders (university academics +master teachers)**

No	Strategies
1	Improve the quality of interactive session of the all-teacher education programmes.
2	Quality improvement of external and internal examiners in relation to the teaching practice supervision and assessment
3	Building a sound university-school partnership with innovative strategies enabling all stakeholder's participation and engagement.
4	Identifying zonal wise schools (representing all administrative districts in the country) as model schools to facilitate the teaching practicum for specially stage II with the support of Ministry of education. Preparation of policy documents/circulars and communicating with all stakeholders to build sound effective university- school partnership.
5	Stabilizing of updated Master teacher pool by the relevant departments and providing them CPD opportunities with the participation of heads (principals) of selected schools.
6	Develop empirical arrangement for the areas of teaching practicum and teacher professional development with the participation of all stakeholders. Conducting impact studies by relevant departments periodically to assess the impact of teaching practicum on professional development of teachers and incorporating results of empirical studies to improve the programme outcomes and organizing dissemination forum with the participation of relevant stakeholders.
	Stablish a special helpdesk by each department during the teaching practicum period

	to facilitate all stakeholders
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According to table 3 above, more important and ground-breaking strategies have been presented by the relevant stakeholders to stablish and maintain strong university school partnership aiming an efficient and effective teaching practicum.

**RQ1- 3. How and to what extent a school–university partnership can be built within a new framework/model.**

Based on the above strategies suggested by relevant stakeholders, researcher was able to conceptualize the outcome-based framework/model to build university-school partnership in relation to teaching practicum of all teacher education programmes delivered by Faculty of Education of the Open university of Sri Lanka. The suggested framework or model is given in the figure 3.

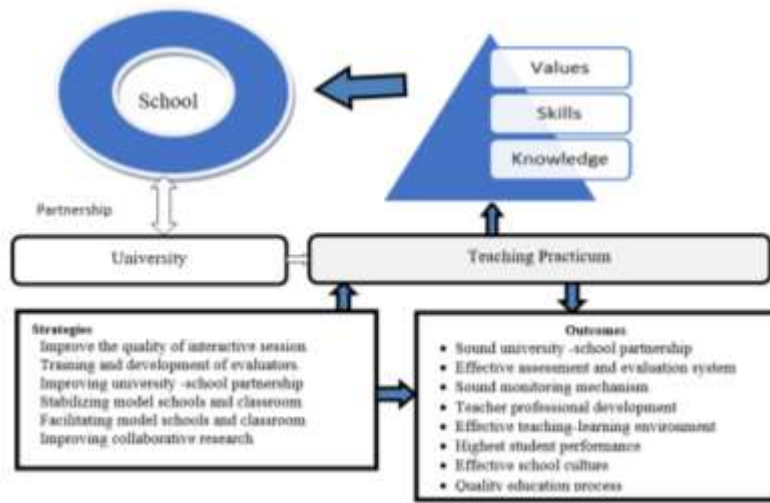


Figure 3; Conceptualization of university -school partnership

According to figure 3, teaching practicum basically depends on acquiring knowledge, skills and values to become a professional teacher. Hence, there should be a sufficient preparation of student-teachers to develop them as quality professionals and therefore the partnership would be advantageous not only for the student-teachers’ learning and development but also for both the university and the school:

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The researcher established that, although the teaching practicum designed by faculty of Education

for all teacher education programmes aiming professional development of student-teachers, insufficient university -school partnership creating a invalid practices to the teaching practicum. The results revealed that, all the stakeholders experienced the inappropriate outcomes due to insufficient university -school partnership in different ways. Based on the findings of this study, suggestions are made on how teaching practicum could be improved to effectively prepare student-teachers as professional teachers to enroll in the teaching profession through sound university -school partnership. Hence through strengthening the university -school partnership can positively influence on the student-teachers’ professional development. To enhance the improvement of the teaching practicum the

following measures could be introduced by the faculty.

1. Improve the quality of interactive sessions delivered by university in relation to the teaching practicum.
2. Providing continuous training and development provisions for all assessors and examiners
3. Improving university -school partnership with new innovative strategies
4. Stabilizing model schools and model classroom and facilitation of teaching practicum
5. Improving collaborative research with all stakeholders

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