

## *Realising Teacher Quality at the M-Level*

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### **Abstract**

In Brunei Darussalam the national university is the main provider of initial teacher education. In 2009, undergraduate initial teacher education formerly provided by the University ceased and was replaced by graduate provision through a Master of Teaching (MTeach) degree programme. The goal was to improve the quality of teaching to achieve the national aspiration for a high quality, forward looking education system for all. The national curriculum for schools provides the framework for teaching and learning, and the development of standards for teaching is used for assessing teacher performance. Applicants for the MTeach must demonstrate a high level of performance in a relevant subject and a strong inclination to teach. This change has been challenging for the stakeholders who need the assurance that sufficient candidates will come forward and who want to see evidence of improved performance of both teachers and their students. Changing the system of teacher education to achieve Masters level outcomes is challenging for all involved. We will draw on a range of data sources to explore the issues and the achievements and to evaluate the progress. We also explored the issues at both personal and system levels and report the effect of the strategies used to overcome them. It goes without saying that realising teacher quality is multi-dimensional enterprise. The case of this small state taking progressive steps to change its system of teacher education will add to our knowledge of what is possible and how.

Keywords: Teacher quality, initial teacher education, challenges, Brunei Darussalam

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## **Introduction**

In 2009, Brunei Darussalam's (henceforth referred to as Brunei) sole provider of English medium teacher education, the Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Education (SHBIE) at the University of Brunei Darussalam, became a Graduate School. All undergraduate initial teacher education programmes formerly provided by the university was replaced by graduate provision through a Master of Teaching (MTeach) degree programme. The MTeach became the entry qualification to the teaching profession in the nation. The goal was to improve the quality of teaching in order to achieve the national aspiration for a high quality, forward looking education system for all. The national education system entitled *Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21* (in Malay) or translated into English as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century National Education System or better known as SPN21, provides the framework for teaching and learning, and the development of standards for teaching is used for assessing teacher performance.

Applicants for the MTeach must demonstrate a high level of performance in a relevant subject and a strong inclination to teach. This change has been challenging for the stakeholders who need the assurance that sufficient candidates will come forward and who want to see evidence of improved performance of both teachers and their students. Whilst this change met with support at the highest level, changing the system of teacher education to achieve Masters level, or M-Level outcomes is challenging for all involved.

In this paper, we will draw on a range of data sources to explore the issues and the achievements and to evaluate the progress of the MTeach programme offered in this country.

## **The Structure of Brunei's MTeach Programme**

The MTeach programme in Brunei initially started in August of 2009 with an 18-month duration structure (or 3 academic semesters). There were four streams, early childhood education and care, primary education, secondary education and vocational and technical education. Vocational and technical education stream was a compulsory inclusion because in Brunei, teachers in the vocational and technical institutions must also be certified with the necessary professional qualification for entry into the teaching profession. There are two intakes of student entry per academic year (January and August) into the MTeach programme.

Table 1 below represents the modules that were common across the four MTeach streams. For the first intake, teacher candidates for the secondary education and vocational and technical education streams were required to register for two learning areas and the selection had to be based on the teacher candidate's academic background, for example, Mathematics and Physics, Geography and History and so on. All MTeach teacher candidates were required to register for a research exercise module in the third semester.

Table 1: Common modules across the MTeach streams for the 18-month duration structure

Common Modules		MTeach Streams (18 month)			
		Early Childhood Education and Care	Primary Education	Secondary Education	Vocational and Technical Education
S1	Professional Practice and Seminar 1	√	√	√	√
S2	Professional Practice and Seminar 2	√	√	√	√
S2	Education Research Methodology	√	√	√	√
S3	Research Exercise	√	√	√	√
S1	Frameworks for Learning and the Design of Instruction		√	√	√
S1	Technology, Pedagogy and Content Knowledge		√	√	√
S3	Social and Professional Contexts		√	√	√
S2	Assessment for Learning			√	√
S3	Teaching and Learning			√	√

Note: S1 denotes the module was offered in Semester 1, S2 in Semester 2 and S3 in Semester 3

However, the 18-month duration MTeach programme only lasted four student intakes. In December of 2010, the institute was advised to reduce the MTeach programme to 12 months. The reason was to offer a graduate diploma level programme, an alternative qualification, lower than a masters, to those who do not qualify for admission to the MTeach programme. And for the benefit of accepted applicants, both programmes had to be within a 12-month duration. Furthermore, we were also advised to create another stream in the MTeach programme for applicants intending to apply for Higher Education.

By January of 2011, with immense pressure, efforts were made to revise and condense the 18-month MTeach programme down to a compact 12-month programme structure. The term 'areas of specialisation' then replaced the word 'streams', some modules were omitted, recoding of the modules had to be made and the research exercise module instead had to be completed within the May to July period. A period usually meant for the long semester university holidays where members of staff take their much needed breaks to rest, recuperate, go on holidays and for some, embark or continue their research writing.

In August of 2011, SHBIE was ready to take on the third cohort (or the fifth intake) of the MTeach teacher candidates. There were then five areas of specialisation in the MTeach programme, namely early childhood and care, primary education, secondary education, vocational and technical education, and higher education. All modules listed Table 1, except for the social and professional contexts module had been retained. The excluded module was replaced with the module called leading,

managing and institutionalising change. Inevitably, reducing the programme also meant slashing the total number of modular credits for the programme from a total of 60 in the 18-month to a total of 48 modular credits applicable across the five areas of specialisation.

A review of the 12-month programme was essential and timely especially within the one year of its implementation. Focus group interviews were conducted in the months of May and June 2012 with 12 selected MTeach teacher candidates representing the four areas of specialisations except early childhood and care, and separately with the MTeach lecturers. Based on the interviews, in relation to the present MTeach programme structure, some pre-service teacher candidates were in agreement to extend the 12-month MTeach programme to a year and a half or more. The main reasons given to this was to manage time between assignments and school placement workload. And their coursework will also include the 8 modular credit research exercise module. However, in-service teacher candidates disagreed by stating that a 12-month MTeach programme was sufficient. It was understood that in-service teacher candidates were only given one year study leave from their work by the government of Brunei with an in-country full in-service training scheme in order to enrol in this programme. There were even suggestions to have separate programme structures for pre-service and in-service teacher candidates.

### **Challenges and Resistance to the Changes**

Here we will share the challenges we have encountered in our journey thus far in relation to implementing the MTeach programme in the institute. Changing the system of teacher education to achieve Masters level outcomes is challenging for all involved.

Drastic changes and shifts in norms of this nature in developing and in the implementation of this new graduate initial teacher education degree in the context of Brunei has, as one would expect come with its criticisms and resistance from many forces in the academia and the public. Among them were the notions that scraping off completely the previous undergraduate bachelor degree programmes in Education was seen as unwise and disaster will mostly likely to prevail. What critics failed to realise was that not just anybody could become a teacher. Applicants for the MTeach must demonstrate a high level of performance in a relevant subject and a strong inclination to teach.

Previously, students were able to enter the teaching undergraduate programmes with lower qualifications than their peers elsewhere in the university. As such, they had significantly less time to develop their subject expertise (four years including professional preparation in teaching) as opposed to a conventional four year degree followed by up to a year for the MTeach. Under the special scholarship scheme for teachers bestowed by His Majesty's Government of Brunei Darussalam through, among others the Ministry of Education and the Yayasan Foundation, many more Bruneians have graduated from overseas such as the United Kingdom, Australia and Malaysia, in specialised subject areas such as English Language, English Literature, Engineering and Mathematics and so on.

Accordingly, these overseas graduates come with specialised undergraduate content degrees, and since they are bonded from the scholarship to work under the government of Brunei as Teachers, one of the requirements is to enrol in the MTeach programme offered in SHBIE. Majority of the Brunei government scholars opted to enrol immediately once they graduated overseas, others required more time such as a short rest period before embarking on further studies at a graduate level. There were even a few others who chose to embark on a working path as uncertified teachers knowing that they will eventually be instructed to pursue MTeach within 3 years in their beginning teaching careers. This was another challenge we encountered. We cannot force any individuals to pursue MTeach unwillingly. We can advise and make suggestions as in pursuing MTeach first will be better in the long run before they start their teaching careers. The programme may help in equipping them with the necessary pedagogical tools and experience needed. Besides the above mentioned overseas applicants, SHBIE also received applications from local graduates such as those from the university itself and other higher institutions in the nation.

The institute, in encountering resistance to the education revolution changes is not alone in facing these forces undermining the commitment to improve the quality of teacher education. Other countries such as the United States such so-called ‘attacks on teacher education’ are frequent. In spite of all these arguments and debates, one of our observations concurs with the statement by Darling-Hammond (2010) “Rarely do these arguments address the implications for schools that are largely staffed by underprepared teachers and the children they serve” (p. 37).

The second of many challenges faced was in raising the new graduate initial teacher education programme to a Master level (or M level). Such paradigm shift proved to be difficult for some stakeholders to accept, and as a result, the institute faced resistance in the first couple of years of change. Nevertheless, as was suggested by earlier consultants to the institute, we needed to refer to the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Framework, or the QAA as a starting point in order to design a professional programme that fully meets the standards of a master degree within the university. Course leaders not only referred to the QAA, but also to the Australian Qualifications Framework, or the AQF. These two frameworks, the AQF and the QAA, became the basis in designing the MTeach programme in order to achieve QAA Level 7 or AQF Level 9 equivalent outcomes (AQF, 2011, 2013; QAA, 2008).

However, it is also important to note that all these qualifications are described in terms of outcomes and in terms of progression. As mentioned earlier, a proposal in another development of the initial teacher education was also offered that provided an alternative initial teacher education qualification at a level lower than Masters. And this was the Graduate Diploma in Education, designed to achieve QAA Level 6 or AQF Level 8 (equivalent) outcomes. A summary of the level descriptors of these two graduate initial teacher education programmes are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Level descriptors for Brunei's initial teacher preparation programmes

Qualification	Level	For admission	Duration	Specialisms
Master of Teaching	QAA Level 7/ AQF Level 9	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Normally a university degree with at least second class honours in an appropriate subject;</li> <li>2. Achievement of the University language requirement;</li> <li>3. Successful performance at interview.</li> </ol>	2 Semesters + Research	Early Childhood Education and Care, Primary Education, Secondary Education (by curriculum subject), Vocational and Technical Education and Higher Education
Graduate Diploma in Education	QAA Level 6/ AQF Level 8	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A university degree in an appropriate subject;</li> <li>2. Achievement of the University language requirement;</li> <li>3. Successful performance at interview.</li> </ol>	2 Semesters + practicum project	Early Childhood Education, Primary Education, Secondary Education, Vocational and Technical Education, Special Education and Counselling

The third challenge encountered was in terms of partnership with the schools or institutions in Brunei and the quality of the internship. Embedded in the programme are two professional practice and seminar modules where teacher candidates attend assigned schools or institutions for a minimum two days a week throughout the programme in addition to six weeks of full time engagement in schools or institutions and attend university campus in the afternoons or evenings to follow taught modules. Drawing from the best practices of teacher education across the globe, teacher candidates are supported by a team of school mentor, subject specialist and clinical specialist. The subject specialists and clinical specialists from SHBIE regularly visit the teacher candidates in schools or institutions forming a quadripartite professional partnership that includes a teacher mentor from the school or institution and the teacher candidate continuously reviewing the progress of the teacher candidate using teacher professional standard benchmarks which focuses on student learning. Fortnightly or bi-weekly seminars with teacher candidates are chaired by the clinical specialists in partner schools. The intention is to monitor and progress performance. Emphasis is also placed on teacher candidates working in teams to carry out action research in schools supported by modules taught in the University.

This being said, the initial allocation of teacher candidates' placements in partner schools or institutions was not always smooth. Often, some schools or institutions refused to accept our teacher candidates even though permission was granted from a higher authority such as the Department of Schools at the Ministry of Education. The

basis of refusal given was that they do not require more teachers in their schools or institutions; there are no mentors to guide the teacher candidates in their respective subject area; the students in the particular schools or institutions will be sitting for the public examinations such as O Level or A Level and hence they do not want to jeopardise the students' chances by having a new teacher teaching the students, and many more pretexts. Consequently the Programme Leader in-charge of school partnership would then have to relocate the affected teacher candidates to another school in the hope that other schools will be willing to accept. Brunei is a small nation with a total of just over 30 government secondary schools across the four districts. The targeted secondary schools that were pre-selected were mainly recommended by the Department of Schools with justifications that good senior mentors will be available to guide our teacher candidates. However, availability may not necessarily mean willing. If a school does accept, the mentorship may also befall onto another colleague who cannot refuse because the instructions may come from the school leaders or administrations. The implications of this happening may come at a cost to the teacher candidate who expected a mentor who is willing to guide and assist in their experience as a beginning teacher.

The quality of the internship is another continuous challenge we encounter every semester. In a situation where schools are just coming to terms with a new national curriculum emphasising a learner centric approach to replace what has previously been, in the main, teacher centric one. These, more than often evidenced in schools or institutions where emphases on the results of public examinations are prevalent. Teacher candidates shared their views with us during the many seminar sessions with the clinical specialists. Sometimes these sessions are seen as a way to release their frustrations of their mentors and the way lessons are taught by the mentors themselves or other teachers whose lessons they went to observe. It has also been difficult for the institute to identify mentors who share the underlying philosophy of teacher education in the MTeach programme.

Other challenges met were in the recruitment of applicants in the primary and early childhood areas. Majority of the applicants opted for either secondary education or vocational and technical education since these two areas mainly focused on the teacher candidates' disciplines or learning areas from their undergraduate degrees, and for some their first master degree qualifications. Over the years, it was not easy for us to attract applicants to enrol in the MTeach early childhood education and care and primary education areas of specialisations. Applicants must show interest and sincere passion to become teachers in these areas. Even if they show the characteristics desirable as early childhood or primary teachers, many will not make the cut during the interview process because they may not have the minimum grades required. Applicants will need at least a Credit C6 in their GCE O Levels (or equivalent) subjects comprising of English Language, *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay Language), Science and Mathematics. A good background content knowledge in these subjects will help them secure a place as potential MTeach early childhood education and care and primary education teacher candidates of the programme. One of the rationales was that once they become fully certified teachers, we could not guarantee that they will be specialising in teaching one subject area in the primary schools in Brunei. Primary school teachers in Brunei are typically required to be generalist teachers, teaching many subject areas across the primary levels. The modules that are offered in the MTeach area of specialisation of primary education will equip teacher

candidates with the pedagogical content knowledge required for their future careers as primary school master teachers.

### Signs of Success of the MTeach Programme

Despite the challenges, we share here the signs of successes of the MTeach programme. The first cohort of 17 MTeach teacher candidates enrolled in the first semester of the Academic Year 2009-2010. As shown in Figure 1, the number of enrolments has slowly but steadily increased over the past four years since the programme was introduced. And in Figure 2 are the frequency of the MTeach teacher candidates enrolled in each of the five areas of specialisations.

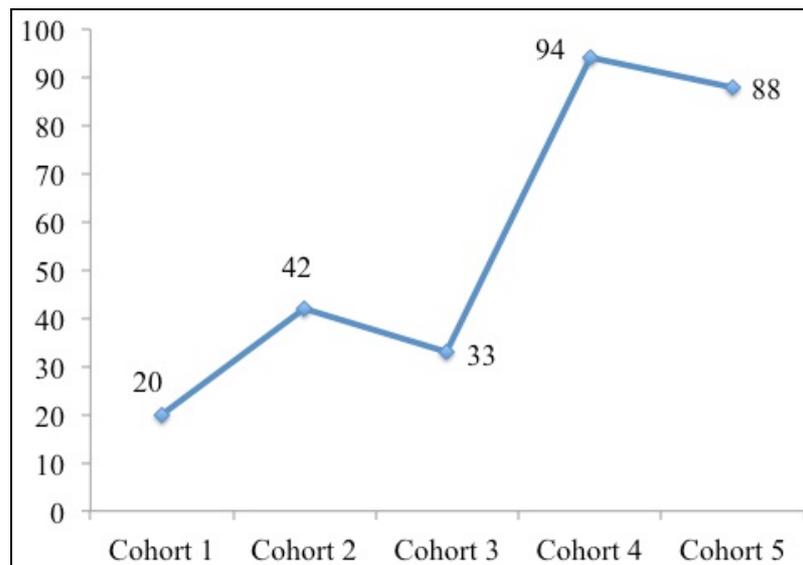


Figure 1: The number of MTeach teacher candidates enrolments

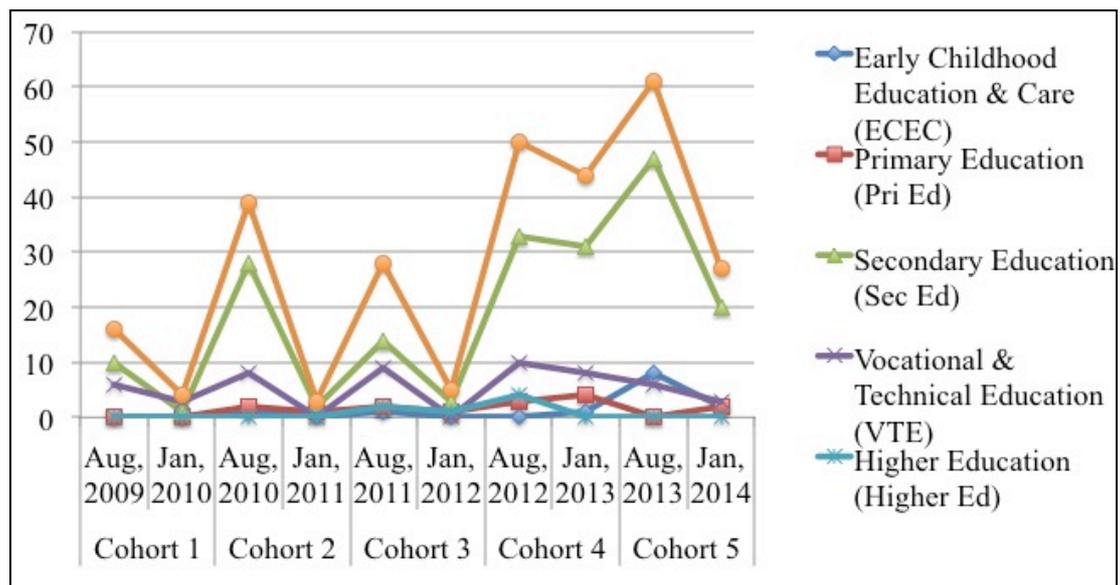


Figure 2: The frequency of MTeach teacher candidates enrolled in each five areas of specialisations

As of September 2013, SHBIE has proudly produced 86 MTeach graduates ranging across the five areas of specialisation from 2011 until 2013. We are expecting 90 more to graduate in September this year, and tentatively, an estimated 122 to enroll in August. The most numbers of enrollments we have see so far. The programme has also attracted international teacher candidates from Australia, Ghana, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Singapore, the Sultanate of Oman, Thailand and Uzbekistan. Upon entry, teacher candidates' academic background ranged from bachelor, master and doctoral degrees.

Apart from the increased number of applications and subsequently increased enrolments in the programme, there has been other several indications of success from the MTeach programme as well. As part of SHBIE's quality assurance procedures, a preliminary study was conducted on the performance of the first cohort of teachers who graduated from the MTeach programme. A research team led by SHBIE colleagues interviewed a sample that comprised of principals, deputies, heads of departments and mentors in the respective schools in Brunei where the MTeach graduates were assigned once they had completed the programme (from the preliminary report by Zailani, Abd Latif & Jaidi, 2011). The preliminary findings provided us with formative evaluation on the effectiveness of the MTeach programme. The overall findings revealed that the first cohort of MTeach graduates has been well received in the workplace. Responses gathered from the interviews with the sample population indicated that the MTeach graduates had begun to develop the skills and knowledge to become not only effective teachers but also teacher leaders which make them distinctive from other teachers with other education backgrounds. There may likely be other range of factors that contributed to the refined dispositions of the MTeach graduates in becoming effective teachers and leaders. Never the less, the responses collected from this preliminary study have shown that the MTeach programme has made a positive contribution towards the development of such qualities. A compilation of the categories and the respective distinctive features of the MTeach graduates from the first cohort, taken from the preliminary study report are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Compilation of the categories and the respective distinctive features of the first cohort MTeach graduates, taken from the preliminary study report by Zailani, Abd Latif and Jaidi (2011)

Categories	Labels	Distinctive Features
In the teaching of the MTeach graduates	Teaching quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ability in employing current methods of teaching, e.g. student-centred learning</li> <li>Knowledgeable and highly skilful, e.g. in ICT and technical skills</li> <li>Shown initiative in varying strategies for teaching, e.g. the use of Internet</li> <li>Highly-motivated in creating interesting lessons</li> <li>Highly-committed in ensuring students' understanding of the lessons</li> <li>Well-organised in planning the lessons</li> <li>Ability to share new ideas and teaching strategies during discussion with their colleagues</li> </ul>

The conduct of non-teaching	Non-teaching commitment	Displaying collaborative and cooperative skills whilst working with other staff members Highly-committed in accomplishing every task given Displaying creativity and innovation in planning events or programmes for the school
The MTeach graduates' disposition	Strong qualities	Displaying leadership qualities Ability in initiating new ideas or changes, futuristic-minded, pro-active Positive rapport amongst staff members and students Displaying strong communication skills
Changes in attitudes before and after MTeach	Attitudes	Better confidence in dealing with students Better confidence in verbalising personal thoughts and ideas with staff members More focused in teaching in terms of planning and conducting their lessons Enhanced leadership skills
Comparisons between the MTeach graduates and other teachers with other educational background	Evident qualities	Salient leadership skills amongst MTeach graduates were quite evident when compared to others They adopted better teaching methods when compared to other teachers Their communication skills were stronger and much better than those of other teachers Lessons conducted were more student-oriented when compared to other teachers They showed abilities in initiating changes to the school system in a short period of time

Below are some quotes from the sample in relation to ensuring the effective delivery of the lessons by one of the MTeach graduates.

*"I can see that she's more into teaching now than I saw her in (her previous school). She's now more...very committed, more towards teaching.....we can see her, even in the staffroom, talking more about teaching, you see. And that is something I'm pleased to see.... even casually talk about how to improve their teaching."* (Principal of a Sixth Form Centre)

And in comparing the MTeach graduates to other teachers from different education background.

*"The difference is the Diploma teachers is more on teaching methodologies but for MTeach teachers...they have the whole package; their teaching methodologies; they have leadership characteristics, and they are very strong in terms of their communication..."* (Deputy Principal of a Vocational and Technical Education college)

During the State Meeting of Legislative Council held in Brunei on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2013, the Education Minister highlighted that the MTeach degree offered by the University has met international standards. He was referring to the Research Report published in September 2012 entitled *"An Assessment of International Teacher Training Systems:*

*Equivalence for England*” by The National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom (UK NARIC) for the UK Department of Education (DfE) (UK NARIC, 2012a, 2012b). The Minister’s speech immediately sparked quite a few criticisms undermining yet again the success of our MTeach programme. Comparisons of initial teacher training programmes from other countries were made and suggestions were put forth as to how the MTeach programme can be further improved.

In summary, although we drew upon the best practices of teacher education globally, ultimately, we also have to consider the uniqueness of Brunei and the context of its education system. Darling-Hammond and Lieberman (2012) stated that “The changes that are needed to build a strong profession of teaching can meet the challenges around the globe will require us to learn from each other about what matters and what works in different contexts” (p. 169). The Brunei education reform continues to demand ‘excellence in teaching and learning’ to achieve the nation’s aspiration of the status of a developed country by 2035. The MTeach programme will continue to aim to produce a caring community of teachers with sound ethical character and leadership skills coupled with a strong knowledge in subject content and pedagogical content knowledge, capable of using technology for effective knowledge building, and ability to construct new learning opportunities for the teacher candidates, their students as well as colleagues. Essentially, the education system in Brunei is changing in line with the current education trend and practices of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As mentioned earlier, the practical experience in schools or institutions provides opportunities for teacher candidates to examine their own teaching through reflections and seminars with mentors, specialists and peers. In summary, the MTeach programme, therefore, could also be viewed in getting our educators to think about their own practices.

Another sign of success was seen from our MTeach graduates and soon-to-be graduates entrusted with the task of being an MTeach mentor themselves. Typically, a mentor’s task was given to senior teachers in schools or institutions as was evidenced from the appointment of cooperating teachers prior to 2009. This shows the trust being laid down to them by the school or institution leaders, in regards to their capabilities, as a powerful indication of their contributions to the qualities achieved from being in the MTeach programme.

Additionally, a few of our MTeach graduates and future graduates have presented and published their research exercises and assignments in conferences and journals (such as, Kani et al., 2014; Khoo & Chin, 2012; Nor & Shahrill, 2014; Omar et al., 2014; Salam & Shahrill, 2014; Yassin & Yong, 2013). Indeed, these accomplishments signified the contributions to their respective areas in education. At the national level, this could be viewed as a significant sign of success in raising the quality of our educators.

Presented in Figure 3 are some of our MTeach graduates’ testimonials in relation to their enrolment in the MTeach programme in SHBIE. Note that names used here are pseudonyms.

*“The course was useful in re-engineering my teaching skills. Among others, I have learnt to use critical self-reflection on my teaching as a tool to improve my lessons.”* (Ariana, MTeach graduate from the 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort)

*“MTeach programme has enriched me with knowledge that is very useful for my future career, and because of this programme I have gained confidence in further projecting myself as well as to be part in the learning curve in exploiting the locus of teaching and learning.”* (Hamzah, MTeach graduate from the 2<sup>nd</sup> cohort)

*“The most valuable insight I gained from the course is that being a good teacher involves helping students build their own concepts and understanding rather than enforcing our concepts on them. Not only does this approach prove useful, it also helps to maintain a higher level of involvement and engagement from the learners.”* (Alisha, MTeach graduate from the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort)

Figure 3: Testimonials of MTeach graduates

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have provided an overview of the graduate initial teacher education offered in Brunei Darussalam, namely the MTeach programme. The road we have travelled from when the institute SHBIE underwent a significant transformation in becoming a graduate school of education. Thus radically transforming initial teacher preparation in Brunei from an essentially undergraduate model where subject content and pedagogical content were taught separately within a four-year undergraduate programme to a graduate level education model. Moreover, the latest developments in re-structuring the programme from an 18-month to a 12-month structure, the increased numbers of prospective applicants applying and subsequently enrolling in this programme, the challenges we faced and the strategies we implemented to overcome these challenges, and also the signs of triumphs that defied those sceptics on the successful implementation of this programme.

We aim in continuing the quest in monitoring and reviewing the progress of the current MTeach structure, its modules and the practice of linking theory to practice, and teacher candidates' experience in the programme as well as in their internship experiences. Building on new designs for teacher education will definitely need to rest on strong partnerships in the context of meaningful involvement by key stakeholders in the education process (Gopinathan et al., 2008). Hence we foresee many more consultations and collaborations with the relevant departments (specifically the Department of Schools, Department of Technical Education, Department of Human Resource Development and the Scholarship Unit) of the Ministry of Education, our major stakeholder, and other relevant ministries, in enriching and improving the quality of teacher education in Brunei.

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