

Notes from Asia Pacific, February 2012

Thailand

Minister for Education Suchart Thadathamrongvech has announced that about 900,000 pupils aged between five and eight in 30,000 government schools around the country will get free tablet computers, in a scheme starting in May. This honours an election pledge by the ruling Puea Thai party last summer. The 900,000 tablet computers required will be bought in a government-to-government deal with China for close to 3 billion baht (S\$120.9 million). There is scepticism over the scheme, which critics at the outset said was just a populist strategy to win votes. They highlight the cost and say the project will be held back because of the lack of Internet access. About 6,000 government schools have Internet access. The government's plan is to roll out the scheme in these schools first. Subsequently, the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology will install wireless Internet access at the remaining schools so that children can use the tablets to their full potential.

Dr Suchart Thadathamrongvech said putting a tablet computer loaded with course books and exercises, and Web access, in the hands of primary school pupils between the ages of five and eight will enable them to think out of the box. 'With a book, you need to follow the teacher,' he said in an interview at his office. 'If the teacher is not good enough, then the student is also not good enough; at best, you are at the same level as your teacher. But if you have a tablet and the teacher does not teach correctly, you have an alternative, you can access information. It will allow students to discuss. Normally, they don't discuss anything, they just remember what the teacher writes on the board. Students should have more discussion in the classroom.' Dr Suchart, who got his PhD at a Canadian university, was appointed following a reshuffle a month ago, and is a self-professed reformer. He has pledged to improve the teaching of English by engaging more native speakers as teachers. There is some scepticism among commentators that this is just another initiative that will fizzle out, but universal agreement that the system is in need of reform.

Singapore

Education Minister Mr Heng is in Washington to sign a bilateral agreement for collaboration in education. On Monday he had a "dialogue" with a group of Singapore students in the US. He stated that Singapore needed "quality education" to enable more Singaporeans to support a role for Singapore to be a "bridge between the world and Asia". He stressed that the Government's aim was not just to focus on a core group of people, but to provide all Singaporeans with a high quality education so that they can seize opportunities to be the best they can be.

"Singapore has good basic knowledge and understanding of the Asian region", he said. And recognising this, several international organisations, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, have established offices in Singapore. Another strength was that Singaporeans were bilingual (English and a mother tongue) and "quite comfortable operating in a multicultural environment". Key to Singapore pursuing the role of middleman between Asia and the world, he said, would be developing the quality of its people through better educational standards.

A few of the students at the meeting felt that the Singapore A-level curriculum was too content-heavy, and called for more breadth. Some such as Ms Nicole Yeo, 21, a former Raffles Junior College humanities student who is studying international politics at Georgetown University, asked for more leeway for students to choose the subjects they are interested in and 'do what they love'. Communications student Agnes Phua of American University agreed, saying she felt forced to learn a certain combination of subjects. Mr

Jonathan Teo, who is studying biophysics at Johns Hopkins University, said Singaporeans were good at mastering content but did not do as well when asked to think out of the box.

Mr Heng conceded that there might have been some trade-offs, but defended the rigour and high standards of the education system. He noted that countries around the world, including the United States, admired Singapore's strength in the sciences. He said the school system gave a good grounding in the various disciplines and 'set students up for success later'. He added that there were also strengths to be gained from delving deep into a subject. 'It is only when you study it deeply that you are able to understand it well and bring it all together,' he said. Singapore universities were also gaining in reputation, said Mr Heng. Similarly, the Institute of Technical Education and polytechnics all had visitors flocking to them to study how the Republic provided high quality education to all.

Some agreed that the rigour in the Singapore system had stood them in good stead. One said that the level of research she was exposed to at junior college level was being taught to students only in the universities in the US.

Earlier in the week, Mr Heng met a group of Singaporean CEOs at a meeting at the Singapore Management University. Employers told him that young Singaporeans need more drive and the confidence to venture out of their comfort zones. Mr Heng recounted the experiences of a chief executive who described the differing responses from a Singaporean worker and a European one, when both were promoted. In Europe, when the chief executive told workers that he wanted to try them out in a new role that came with different responsibilities, the staff members asked how the company would help them to succeed and what sort of training they would need. But when the chief executive approached Singaporeans, he was shocked by the response: 'What if I fail? Will I still have a job? Is there a support system and do I get retrenchment benefits?'

China

Chinese applicants are this week getting their acceptances or rejections from US universities. In many cases, according to anecdotal evidence and hard-data surveys, the successful Chinese applicants will have cheated their way into college. There are now 57,000 Chinese undergraduates at American universities. Karin Fischer, a senior reporter with The Chronicle of Higher Education, called China "a great market" for U.S. colleges, but she also cited concerns that "a lot of American colleges don't exactly know where they're getting their Chinese students from." Many Chinese families hire agents to help them navigate the applications process, and an agent's fee can range up to \$10,000, plus an equally large bonus if the student gets into a high-ranking school in international league tables (including the "Shanghai List"). Zinch China, a consulting company that advises American colleges and universities about China, reported last year that they found cheating on college applications to be "pervasive in China, driven by hyper-competitive parents and aggressive agents. ... Our research indicates that 90% of recommendation letters are fake, 70% of essays are not written by the applicant, and 50% of high school transcripts are falsified." Other reports state that young Ivy League graduates write essays for Chinese applicants while many a Chinese public school fakes transcripts and recommendation letters. The Aoji Education Group, a college counselling agency in China, offers a guaranteed-placement package: The student and her family get a full refund if she isn't admitted to any of her top five choices. "If a student isn't placed, we've got screaming, yelling parents in the lobby," said Kathryn O'Hehir, who works in Aoji's office in Beijing. "They don't want their money back. They want their kid in an Ivy League school."

USA

There is press disquiet at the activities of unregulated recruitment agents for US community colleges in Asian countries, who are paid a commission per student recruited. In the United

States, it is illegal to pay recruiters for each student they bring in — a practice outlawed 20 years ago because of widespread abuse by agents who signed up anyone they could, regardless of academic potential. But the use of commissioned agents to recruit international students remains a highly divisive, hotly debated, issue in higher education circles in the US. Community colleges argue that they need agents who can explain the role of community colleges overseas, and they - and US universities - point to the fact that agents are allowed to be paid per student recruited by British and Australian universities.

Last spring, the board of the National Association for College Admission Counseling issued a draft policy for its members against the use of commissioned overseas agents. However, the policy has not yet been adopted, and there are rumours that it could be legally challenged for restraint of trade or that colleges will leave the Association rather than follow the policy.

Malaysia

A press article has drawn attention to the "shocking fact" that in Malaysia one out of every ten Chinese students drops out of school at 16. This casts in a different light the myth of the "academically superior" Chinese in Malaysia. The problem has been identified as the policy regarding the medium of instruction in state schools. When the government adopted a single education policy and terminated public Chinese secondary schools, this left the country with 1,293 primary schools which are Chinese medium and only 78 secondary schools which have Chinese language as a subject and some subjects in Chinese.

Pupils who complete Chinese primary school are faced with two options for secondary education: national secondary schools where Bahasa Malaysia is the teaching medium or privately run 60 Chinese independent secondary schools (CISS) where Chinese is the medium of instruction. Many parents have no choice but to send their children to national secondary schools in view of the high fees of the private CISS. When making this transition, Chinese-educated primary pupils — like their Tamil-educated counterparts — struggle not only with the Bahasa Malaysia subject but other subjects, too, which are all taught in Bahasa Malaysia. Not many pupils can cope; they flounder in class, struggling to learn new concepts in a new language, especially when they are placed in "poor" classes where less attention is given to them. Some lose interest in their studies, dropping out as soon as they complete their Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) examinations.

Solutions to this problem might be to improve the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia in the Chinese-medium primary schools, in order to prepare students better for the transition, or to improve the option of a transitional "remove" year between primary and secondary for those who are not fluent in Bahasa Malaysia. In September last year, 13 Chinese-based associations under the governing body "Committee Members of Secondary School Dropouts, Plan of Action for Malaysia" called on the Education Ministry to review the remove class system, citing weaknesses in the syllabus, the standard of teaching and the way the classes were conducted.