

Notes from Asia Pacific, late February 2012

Hong Kong

The Public Examinations Board of the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority announced this week that would "streamline" the School-based Assessment (SBA) for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examination. This is in response to widespread criticism - notably by school principals - of the workload burden on students and teachers imposed by SBA. The "streamlining" takes two forms; a reduction in some subjects of the number of tasks and the proportion of marks based on SBA, and a lengthening of the timetable for introducing SBA more widely. The revised arrangements will be implemented for relevant subjects in the 2014 HKDSE Examination. The SBA of Chinese Language and Liberal Studies will also be streamlined in the 2013 Examination. For the eleven deferred subjects where SBA was originally scheduled to be implemented between 2014 and 2016, full implementation will be postponed to 2016, with school trials to be conducted in 2014 and 2015. Full details can be found at

http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/MainNews/PR_20120214_eng.pdf.

Hong Kong (2)

There has for some time been a public debate about whether there are sufficient places in HK international and overseas schools for the children of foreigners who live and work in HK. Most of the overseas Chambers of Commerce have argued that long queues for schools are discouraging overseas investment while education officials have said that there is sufficient supply. In parallel, the saga continues about the future of Government subsidy for schools run by the English Schools Foundation (ESF).

Last year the government asked the Census and Statistics Department to look into the matter. It reported that more than 70 per cent of applicants said they had waited less than six months to get an international school place - a finding that was described as undermining the allegations of long queues. The department also found that only one in four pupils attending international schools planned to apply for secondary school places in HK. There is also an expected expansion of the number of international places by 5,000 (out of 37,000).

Meantime, a study by Crown Relocations showed that in December 2011 only six of the 37 international and ESF schools had places for primary one pupils. Only two schools on Hong Kong Island were said to have vacancies.

Both candidates for the forthcoming election of HK's new Chief Executive have pledged to continue funding for the English Schools Foundation and enhance the support for international schools.

Australia

In the days after the NAPLAN 2011 results were released, Prime Minister Gillard cited the OECD's PISA 2009 report, and more recent analysis of it by the Nous Group, as evidence that Australia's international standing was slipping. Broadly, Australia's performance was remaining fairly stable, or declining slightly (with problems of underachievement by disadvantaged groups not being resolved), while other SE Asian countries were overtaking Australia. "There are disturbing signs that countries in our region are getting in front of us and we need to address that," Gillard said.

There are two theories about this: one, supported by the Government and by Dr Geoff Masters, CEO of the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER), is that Australia was failing to stretch its high-achieving students. Dr Masters said that PISA clearly showed Australia's average reading performance had actually declined over a decade. And the

explanation for that was largely a decline in the performance by Australia's highest achieving students. "We have fewer 15-year-olds performing at very high levels in reading than we had a decade ago," Masters said, adding that more high performing students lift the country's mean score. He said Australia was the only high performing country to have experienced a reduction in its reading literacy levels over the decade. "The explanation is not across the board, it's at the top end," he said. He agreed that in other measures Australia had experienced a "relative decline rather than absolute decline". The Tasmanian Dept of Education has argued that the emphasis on national test outcomes for younger children (NAPLAN) has led to neglect of the brightest cohort of students.

The second view, supported by Sue Thomson, director of educational monitoring and research at ACER, is that the emphasis should be on improving the performance of the students in the lowest bands. Thomson, who is national project manager for PISA in Australia, said that if they decrease the proportion of students in the "tail" (those achieving below Proficiency Level 2) by 10 per cent that will lift Australia's overall score by about 5 points. She pointed to Germany, which had decreased the number of its students in the lowest percentiles. This had the result of lifting its performance in PISA between 2006 and 2009.

When asked his opinion of the suggestion that NAPLAN was having a negative effect on high performing students, as put forward by the Tasmanian Department of Education, Masters said he broadly agreed. "We need to be looking at what we can do to challenge and extend students at all levels of achievement ... It's true there's been a very high priority given to making sure that all students achieve at least minimum standards, through firstly the state testing programs and then over the last four years of the NAPLAN tests."

There was international support for such an argument, he said, and pointed to the minimum competency testing program in the US several decades ago which was found to encourage teachers to focus on students below the minimum competency level at the expense of students who had already achieved the standard or were so low they weren't likely to achieve it.

However, Masters said this was a hypothesis and there may be other explanations, such as 15-year-olds simply not reading as many extended texts as they once did.

Thailand

Apparent flaws in the Ordinary National Educational Test (O-Net) have provided another strong reminder that Thailand's education system badly needs improvement. For years, agencies have lamented the falling average of O-Net scores among students in all subjects. But a recent report has also criticised the O-Net test itself, asserting that, if the International Schools' Assessment test (ISA) reflected the vision of the 21st century, Thailand's O-Net was stuck to the 20th century. The report also criticised the reliability and validity of some of the O-Net test items, compared, for example, with those in PISA.

An example of a poor question was: - "If you have a sexual urge, what should you do?" a) Ask friends if you can play football together; b) Consult family members; c) Try to sleep; d) Go out with a friend of the opposite sex; or e) Invite a close friend to watch a movie together." The "right" answer is (a), but the former Director of the National Institute of Educational Testing Service got it wrong and the preferred answer was arguably less appropriate for girls than boys. The quality of the test questions has been criticised by universities, teachers and parents - and there has also been adverse comment on the extensive use of multiple-choice questions in O-Net as well as the lack of scope for open-ended replies. Institute for Research and Quality Development Foundation chairman Chainarong Indhara-meesup said any minor mistake could ruin the credibility and reliability of the tests. "If internal panels can't notice the minor mistakes, recruit the help of outsiders," he suggested.

Thailand (2)

A "Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education project" is being carried forward in 11 schools in different parts of the country where the majority of students do not speak Thai as their mother tongue. In early years the children are taught partly in their native language/dialect and then introduced to Thai more gradually, with support from teaching assistants who speak their language/dialect.

The director of a school in North Thailand where almost all the students speak Hmong said that to use gestures with explanations in Hmong and in Thai when teaching them the Thai language was a "total physical response" technique. "Before doing this project only 60% of Prathom 3 (grade 3) students could read Thai, but now 70-80% can do so, while kindergarten students' development has obviously improved". The use of Hmong in class is reduced gradually when they reach higher levels. It is replaced by Thai language. We will use a hundred per cent Thai language in class when they reach Prathom 4," he added.

"This project could help us prepare children living near the border of the country for the ASEAN Economic Community," Office of Basic Education Commission Deputy Secretary General Benjalug Namfa said. She cited research that children who had already known two languages would be able to learn a third language more easily. She believed that to learn English as their third language would not be very difficult for them. They were born multi-cultural - their own and Thai (at school) - which would help them when they had to adjust themselves to the outside world. She went on to claim their dialects were similar to Thailand's neighbouring countries' languages so they would understand Thai language clearly but also be able to communicate with citizens from those countries.

Vietnam

A press interview with Tran Hong Quan, chairman of the Vietnam Association of Non-public Universities and Colleges, quoted him as saying that Vietnam has too many weak private universities but that, since demand far exceeds supply, there is no pressure on them to improve. There are examples of employers refusing to accept job applicants with private university degrees and Mr Tran argued for comparability studies to compare the degrees offered by different institutions.

The quality of private schools is generally high. But the opposite is the case with private tertiary institutions. The number of universities (including private) is not high, compared with, for example, Malaysia, but the quality is poor, perhaps through underfunding and lack of quality control. That in turn leads to a shortage of well-qualified graduates to teach in (state, non-private) schools.

The government has a target that 40% of students studying in private universities by 2020, up from the current 14%. Most commentators do not believe that the 2020 target will be met, especially since the target date has already been pushed back from 2010.

Malaysia

As in other SE Asian countries, parents are increasingly sending their children, aged between 7 and 10, for private tuition. They cite the competitive school environment, crowded classrooms and changing standards of language as reasons. But there are also perceptions that extra tuition places unnecessary stress on the child. The New Straits Times cites Sharon Lieu, a 36-year-old mother of three, who sends her eldest daughter, aged 8, for Mathematics and English tuition twice a week. Even though Lieu does not believe that primary school children should be attending tuition classes, her daughter's struggle to catch up with her classmates had forced the matter. "In school, her class is so big that the teachers don't have time to help the few who cannot follow the lessons. Some have even told the students, 'Ask your tuition teacher' when the child says they can't understand."

Education experts have criticised the practice as harmful to children's development, but the Education Ministry feel that there isn't much they can do about it. "Ultimately, it is the parents' choice. I'm not saying it is healthy, but parents just want the best for their children. If they believe tuition is the way to go, then there is nothing to stop them," deputy education minister Dr Puad Zarkashi said.