

Notes from Asia Pacific - early May 2012

Asian Physics Olympiad, 2012

This took place last week in India, with participation from 21 countries. Vietnam did well, as it usually does. Despite low outcomes overall, they usually win medals in international events of this kind for high-fliers in maths and science. At the recent physics event, they won eight medals: one gold, five silver and two bronze. This is a step up from last year's competition when they won two bronze medals and a certificate of merit - and the success was proudly reported in Vietnam.

Vietnam

25 April saw the publication of *Vietnam High Quality Education For All*, a report on Vietnam's primary and secondary education performance produced by the World Bank, UK Department for International Development and Belgium Development Cooperation. It assesses the progress made in primary and secondary schooling, against the backdrop of Vietnam's *Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2011-2020* and the *Education Strategic Development Plan 2011-2020*. Both emphasize the need for quality education for all to enhance productivity, growth and social development.

The report offers an analysis of educational performance over time (1992-2008) and the drivers of change to inform the next decade of policy reforms in Vietnam. It shows that Vietnam has made impressive gains in improving educational performance over a relatively short period of time. Vietnam's literacy rate and school attendance rate compare favourably to other countries in the region and in the same income group. However, inequalities in access to education and poor educational outcomes (notably in Vietnamese reading) persist, as do shortcomings in teacher education, experience and content knowledge.

The recommendations include improved pedagogical practice, with more interaction with students - an area where the report found "very little progress". The report also urged participation by Vietnam in international tests such as PISA, and welcomed the decision by the Vietnamese government to participate in PISA 2012. The policy report can be accessed at: http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2012/04/18/000333038_20120418012127/Rendered/PDF/680920v10WP0P10oduc0tap10Enql012012.pdf

Indonesia

UK trade and investment minister Lord Green recently visited Indonesia in April as part of the trade delegation led by British Prime Minister David Cameron. The visit underlined the UK's commitment to building the two countries' political and economic relationship. Today's Jakarta post included a report on an extended interview with Lord Green, where he reported that the PM had set him a target of doubling bilateral trade with Indonesia by 2015 and he named education as one of the specific areas for greater investment by the UK.

Thailand

Three agencies of the Education Ministry (including the Office of the Private Education Commission) are to be brought into the Ministry in what is clearly a move to tighten central controls. .

Under the Thai Government's One Tablet PC per Child policy, the first batches of tablet PCs are scheduled to arrive in selected primary and secondary schools across Thailand. Meanwhile, the programme to train educational supervisors on how to use these tablet PCs has feverishly begun. These supervisors will then fan out across the country and instruct elementary school teachers on how to use them to teach classes. There is some concern that insufficient thinking has gone into how the PCs can be used to engage students in their learning and in critical thinking, rather than simply providing opportunities for the students to use them for games and E-mailing their friends.

Singapore

In Singapore, MOE-endorsed textbooks are regarded as absolute authorities for teaching. Today's press reports disapprovingly of what we would think of as an obscure mistake in a Government-endorsed history textbook used in all Secondary 1 history classes that "went undetected for six years". It comprised wrongly using the Chinese term "shi" to denote noblemen who ruled over parcels of land in Ancient China. . Parents have been quoted as asking where the next mistake is coming from and teachers are cited as saying that they assumed that what was in the authorised textbook was correct. MOE is arranging a new edition and issuing printed amendment slips for teachers to use. This episode shows the huge importance ascribed by teachers and parents to Government-endorsed textbooks.

There are a number of polite letters to the press from parents complaining about the increasing costs of pre-school fees – the Singaporean version of a campaign. Mid-year increases are seen as particularly unfair as parents will be reluctant to move their child in mid-year to a cheaper alternative.

Hong Kong

The Hong Kong Government has announced a delay in the introduction of mandatory 'national education' classes which have been criticised as a bid to brainwash children with Chinese patriotism.

Under the proposal students would take 50 hours of lessons a year focusing on 'building national harmony, identity and unity among individuals'. There would be no exams, but classes would assess if pupils 'feel happy to be Chinese' or 'consider the needs of the country when planning their future', according to guidelines posted on the website of the Education Bureau.

Education Secretary Michael Suen said he would follow a committee's recommendations to delay their introduction until 2015 instead of this year as previously planned, to give schools more time to prepare. The classes will provide a 'more systematic, holistic and sustainable learning experience that can cater for their developmental needs and cultivate their moral and national qualities through a value-based curriculum', he said in a statement. 'This subject emphasises the nurturing of positive values and a responsible character. It enables students to acquire desirable personal, moral and national qualities, enriching their life and facilitating their identity-building in the domains of family, society, the country and the world'. The Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union in 2011 called on the government to block the proposal, which it described as 'political interference' from the mainland.

The marking period of public examinations has just started. This year, onscreen marking is being used for nine HKALE and 18 HKDSE subjects and around 4,600

markers are commissioned to mark the scripts on screen. To enhance the efficiency of marking, the HKAEA have opened four more assessment centres. A total of 1,400 workstations are provided for onscreen marking in seven assessment centres across Hong Kong. HKAEA have produced a video about on-screen marking that aims to reassure the public (and teachers?) about the processes involved and present on-screen marking as a quality improvement. The English version of the video can be seen at http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/en/exam_personnel/OSM/osm_video/.

Private tutorial companies are claiming that the move to the new Diploma in HK has provided opportunities for high earnings in classes for "liberal studies" (which is part of the compulsory core). Although the reforms which included the new Diploma aimed to move away from the "spoon-feeding" with which the tutorial companies were traditionally associated, what seems to be happening is the supply side of the tutorial market is simply adapting to the changed focus of the Diploma.