

Notes from Asia Pacific May 2012

Singapore

We are now heavily into the pre-exam season, with adverts for the traditional (and expensive) "Essence of Chicken" - and more modern vitamin drinks, etc. - claiming to bring success with A grades. Even quite small stories about school exams or tests are quite high-profile at this time. For example, there were press reports that about 150 students in Punggol Secondary School had to retake a (10-minute) section of their mid-year English test on Friday after some scripts went missing in a "holding room" in the school. The parents involved were phoned individually by the school and there has been a report to the Ministry of education.

There is a more substantial report that some students who do not have to sit the O-level examination because they are in the Integrated Programme (IP) and taking IGCSEs as private candidates. They are barred from sitting national O levels as private candidates but can go to a centre such as the British Council to enrol as a private candidate for IGCSEs. Some want to know where they stand; others are simply interested in the subjects. Some hope, after Secondary 4, to apply to American universities which recognise IGCSE grades. Most importantly, these students want a 'safety net': Should they not fare well, they would only have their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) certificate and their secondary school grade point average to fall back on. The wish for a safety-net is very strong in some of the Singaporean cultures.

The British Council, which administers the IGCSE for private candidates here, said 69 students took it last year. Six in 10 were Singaporeans, mostly between the ages of nine and 20. The British Council said it neither has figures for previous years nor tracks the schools these candidates were from. CIE is quoted as saying that, since 2008, more than 16,000 candidates from Singapore, mostly from the international schools, have sat IGCSEs and that the number has grown, on average, by 19 per cent a year. Edexcel have said that about 1,100 students from Singapore sat the exam last year, 20 per cent of them as private candidates.

Malaysia

The Malaysian Education Ministry has announced an end to the quota for Malaysian students enrolling in international schools.

The move will ensure that more Malaysian students are able to enrol in any one of the international schools in the country as the previous cap of 40 per cent will be removed. "We decided on this as it is in line with the government's Economic Transformation Programme to make the country a regional education hub," Deputy Education Minister Wee Ka Siong said. He remarked that Thailand had taken similar action, and Malaysia needed to do the same to remain competitive.

There are more than 100 international schools in Malaysia, with most having long waiting lists for students stretching up to two years. It is not clear whether they plan to expand to meet the burgeoning demand.

The foreign schools charge nearly RM60,000 (£13K) a year for preschool to O levels. Parents also have to pay a non-refundable fee to put their children on the waiting lists as part of the enrolment process. Most national schools, on the other hand, provide education free of charge. However, more middle-class Malaysians are eager to enrol their children in international schools and are prepared to use their savings to do so.

Critics of the announcement have said that it may have the effect of widening still further the gap in attainment between children from rich and poor families.

Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who is on a visit to the United Arab Emirates, said that the "blueprint" for the latest review of education promised by the Malaysia Government would be ready by August.

Speaking to an audience of about 250 people (largely Malaysian expats in the UAE), Muhyiddin said the government was focusing on how the national education system could produce a skilled and qualified workforce.

"The Economic Transformation Programme, which the government is implementing now, is expected to create job opportunities for 3.3 million people. A big portion of this needs to be filled by qualified locals."

Muhyiddin said that was why the government hoped to bring back Malaysians working abroad so that they could contribute to the country's development and growth.

Vietnam

The Ministry of Education and Training has set a target of universalising pre-school education for children aged five by 2015.

It will also strive to ensure 70 per cent of elementary school students, 30 per cent of secondary students, and 25 per cent of high-school students study two periods a day by then.

It wants to attract 15 per cent of high-school graduates to vocational streams by 2015 and ensure 95 per cent of students graduating from vocational schools find employment.