

## Notes from Asia Pacific, July 2012

### International subject Olympiads

The latest mathematics Olympiad was held in Argentina in the first half of July. The gold medallist (with a maximum score) was from Singapore, and the top national teams were: 1st: Korea; 2nd: China; 3rd: USA; 4th: Russia; 5th: Canada. Singapore came 7th. Reports are now coming in on the physics Olympiad held this week in Estonia, but the Thai press have triumphantly announced that Thai students obtained three gold medals, one silver and one bronze.

### Malaysia/Singapore

The Malaysian branch of the English public school Marlborough College opens next month in Iskandar (the development area in the South of Johor Bahru, just over the Causeway from Singapore), with its first input of 300 pupils aged 5 to 11. About half of them will travel from Singapore in a shuttle bus. Most of the travellers from Singapore are children of expats working in Singapore. The Master of Marlborough College Malaysia is Mr Robert Pick. When Marlborough was looking for a "branch school" in the region, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, India and Malaysia all expressed an interest. Marlborough chose Malaysia largely because of the large amounts of land available (the press reports speak of lavish facilities) and also cited Malaysia's "keen interest in education". This is another step forward in the project to establish Iskandar as an edu-hub. A think-tank commentator quoted in the press remarks that it is one thing to provide an edu-hub for an elite, but another to improve education for all.

### Hong Kong

#### Ministry/HKEAA

Mr Eddie Ng, former Chairman of the HKEAA, has been appointed as the new Secretary for Education by the HKSAR Government, and Mr Stephen Hui Chin-yim, current Deputy Chairman of HKEAA has been appointed as the Acting Chairman. Mr Hui has been Deputy Chairman for the Council and Chairman for the Public Examinations Board from 2006 and has been leading the development of public examinations ever since.

The row rumbles on about the roll-out of the new national education curriculum in primary schools from the forthcoming academic year. Some have described it as hasty. Today's press reports that the big education publishers (they name OUP) are keeping clear of the subject (despite the potentially large market) and that a smaller publisher (Pilot Publishing) has been investing in developing new textbooks but they are not ready yet.

### Thailand

At a recent conference on vocational education Education Deputy Permanent Secretary Churairat Sangboonnum said the Education Ministry was trying to convince more students to take up vocational or technical education. Currently the ratio of students studying general and vocational or technical education was 60 to 40 per cent but the ministry aims to increase the number of vocational or technical students to a 50:50 ratio or 40:60 (general education students: vocational/technical students). "We're trying to change the attitude of parents and teachers so that they will encourage more students to go for vocational or technical education rather than higher education," she said. She added that the ministry had implemented three

policies - raising students' awareness about the ASEAN community, increasing their language ability, especially English and Chinese, and equipping them with vocational or technical skills to produce qualified personnel for the labour market.

### Vietnam

A workshop entitled "Solution to reform teachers training and fostering", organised by the Vietnam Peace and Development Foundation was told that primary, secondary, and junior school teachers work 60 to 70 hours a week, but half of them get paid below the national average. That was one reason why out of 20,000 university applicants in HCM City in 2010-12, only 5 per cent wanted to study teaching. Nguyen Thi Binh, the country's former deputy president and chairwoman of the Foundation, said that the current training process, which focuses on transmitting knowledge, provides "teaching workers," not educators.

Professor Dinh Quang Bao of the Teaching Study Institute said to get educators, teacher training universities must ensure they produce students with teaching professionalism, general knowledge and professional knowledge. But he considered that most universities did not focus enough on teaching professionalism. He also described the quality of entrance exams to these universities as "pitiful."

### Korea

According to data compiled by Statistics Korea and the Bank of Korea, households in the bottom 20 percent of the income bracket said they used 2 percent of their loans to educate their children last year. This is 2.5 times higher than the 0.8 percent spent on the same purpose by households in the top 20 percent income class. This gap has coined a new term "edu poor," indicating poor people whose salaries remain low but who do not intend to sacrifice their childrens' education to beat the financial pinch. Low-income households are increasingly prepared to mortgage their homes to pay for rising education costs.

Despite the slowdown in inflation, costs for private education are still on the rise. Consumer prices recorded 2.2 per cent growth in June, marking a 32-month low. However, fees for private academies jumped 5.3 per cent for middle school students, and 5 per cent for high schoolers. The costs for elementary school students went up by 4.7 per cent.

### China

An NGO that focuses on women's rights has urged authorities to look into allegations that several colleges have lowered their minimum entrance-exam scores only for boys. According to the website of Beijing Foreign Studies University, the minimum admission score for girls in Beijing who apply as a German major at the university is 639, while for boys it is 598. Renmin University of China, another prestigious college, has set a minimum admission score in the capital area in four language majors this year at 601 for boys but 614 for girls. And, according to the Education Examinations Authority of Guangdong province, many universities set different admission standards based on gender in 2012.

Tan Songhua, a member of the State Education Counselling Committee, acknowledged that students are admitted with different grades in the same college entrance exam. "The focus of the exam is memorizing, which girls are better at," Tan said.