

## Notes from Asia Pacific, January 2013

### Exam results

In this part of the world we are into the results season for examinations which were taken towards the end of 2012. This week saw the announcement of IB Diploma results, and in Singapore the press proudly announced that the city-state had “top[ped] the Asia Pacific region”(not clear what figure that refers to) in IB Diploma scores. There were 41 “perfect” scores in Singapore, of which 37 came from the Anglo Chinese School (Independent).

Arguably, some of these outcomes may reflect concerted efforts by some Singapore schools to focus their teaching in ways that will achieve the highest possible scores, but the same could probably be said for some schools (particularly in societies like Singapore which place high status on exam outcomes) which obtain outstanding results in other examinations. Singapore had 1,370 IB Diploma candidates, as compared with over 14,000 candidates for Singapore A levels.

Aspects of the IB approach which were picked up by the press in Singapore included the scope to take account of cross-curricular interests (a boy was able to involve his interest in sport in his extended essay, which was about the geometry of shots able to score nets in basketball after hitting the back board) and the use of continuous assessment (a girl was quoted as commenting that “you can’t just rely on sprinting at the end”).

Next week will see the results of Singapore/Cambridge O Levels. Over the past year, the Government has tried to divert attention away from naming high achievers in public exams (including the stressful Primary School Leaving Examination) to emphasising that there are many different routes to success and highlighting students who have overcome significant obstacles, such as disability or caring responsibilities at home, or who have turned their performance round after doing badly previously.

High-ability students in Singapore’s “Integrated Programme” will normally skip O Level, and use the time gained for “enrichment” studies around the curriculum leading to A Level, so they will not be included in the results. There may be a reprise of the regular debate about the value of O Levels in today’s educational scene. In recent years there has been something of a revival of support for them, even for academic students progressing to A Level, although it is difficult to tell how much that support has been stimulated in an attempt to ease the disappointment of parents of students who miss out on a place on the Integrated Programme.

### Freedom – international league tables

The Fraser Institute in Canada has published a new book, Towards a Worldwide Index of Human Freedom, in which they have calculated scores for countries against criteria for personal and economic freedom. Their indicators seem to be based on a capitalist/individualist basket of values – markets, democracy, social and political human rights and religious and moral tolerance. To the delight of its press, Hong Kong comes third – ahead of the USA (7th) and the UK (18th), although this is largely because it scores highest in the world on “economic freedom”, followed by Singapore, while both score much lower on “personal freedom” (Hong Kong scores 7.8 out of 10 and Singapore 6.6). Malaysia (99th) and China (100th) are low on both counts while Burma has the distinction of being second bottom, just above Zimbabwe.

One of the many questions raised by these findings is the link between open markets and extending personal freedom and/or democracy, taken as a given in the West but much more

contested elsewhere in the world. "No nation that has adopted economic freedom has ever failed to evolve towards civil and political freedoms, with only two possible exceptions: Singapore and Hong Kong," says the report. "The great question for the future is whether ... market reforms ultimately lead to other freedoms in China."

#### UK scientific and university leaders in Singapore

This week, Singapore welcomed Professor Sir Paul Nurse, president of the Royal Society, eminent microbiologist and Nobel prize-winner, together with Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell, a leading physiologist and champion of science in public life, as well as president and Vice Chancellor of the University of Manchester. Speaking to a packed audience at the British High Commission, both speakers emphasised that the UK was "good at science" and that the country tended to beat itself up too readily, although they conceded there was room for improvement.

Nancy Rothwell spoke about "the university in the modern society", setting out drivers for change, the challenges of responding to funding changes and of developing students as independent learners, despite the fact that they may have been spoon-fed in their learning at school. She was bullish about the amount of academic freedom possible in today's Britain - which didn't mean "doing what we like" - but required space for research which was some distance from application. She also emphasised the "social responsibility" of universities in their local community and in the nation.

Sir Paul Nurse started by stating that, contrary to the negative messages about student immigration and visas emanating from UK Ministers, the UK was open for business for the best scientists from all over the world, including Singapore. He spoke of the new Crick Institute, which he will be heading and which is being built in central London, which will offer facilities for interdisciplinary research and provide long-term (but not tenured) posts for scientists in mid-career.

Finally he raised some questions about the future role of the Royal Society, including whether its inherited Commonwealth role remained relevant. The audience, some of which were scientists from European (non-Commonwealth) countries, were highly sceptical about the relevance of the Commonwealth to scientific progress in developed countries such as Singapore, and the High Commissioner admitted that he "never uses the word 'Commonwealth' in Singapore".

It is suspected that Sir Paul will get a similar reaction in his next ports of call – Australia and New Zealand. If he had gone to India, Sri Lanka or sub-Saharan Africa perhaps he would have heard a different story.