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NIECER Seminar on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT)

Dr Soh Kay Cheng, NIECER

On 9 February 1999 a seminar was held at NIECER to discuss one of the recommendations of the Committee on the University Admission System. The Committee has recommended to the Government that the US-developed SAT 7 be used as one of the criteria for university admission from the year 2002, in addition to the usual GCE A-Level Examination results. This has generated much discussion in the local major newspapers. As the recommendation has both professional and practical significance for NIE, especially in connection with enrolments in the BA/BSc programme, NIECER organised a seminar for interested staff to exchange views and discuss the implications of this recommendation.

After Professor Gopinathan opened the seminar with his views on why NIE should be interested in the recommendation, the author presented a paper entitled "Much Ado with SATs", in which he briefly traced the history of the American SAT test and its influence on similar tests in Sweden, Israel, Britain, Australia and Canada. He pointed out that while Sweden and Israel continue to use their own versions of scholastic aptitude tests, the other three countries have discontinued with them after years of research. Research has shown that the SAT does have a coaching effect, though normally the gain is limited and depends on the initial scores, as well as the sub-tests.

The use of the SAT will probably benefit Singapore in several ways. It will enable Singapore to peg herself against a long-established international standard and its use avoids the "hazard of the single indicator". As a side-effect, it may motivate students (and teachers) to go beyond the usual school texts and tests, and it may move us away from the traditional, commonsensical (and often psychometrically questionable) practices by making our examination and selection more scientific. In the long run, this may influence how assessment is conducted and how teaching is carried out at the Junior College and school level.

In his paper, the author cautioned against some psychometric pitfalls that may not be obvious to the layperson. In particular, he expressed his concern for the spurious precision of the standard score of a norm-referenced test

and the high-stakes decision made on the difference between scores that have no substantive meaning. Another concern is the practice of adding scores without first scaling them to the same mean and standard deviation, a practice that will nullify weights of different components of the university admission system. He also raised the question of using a normal distribution for stringent selection at the right-hand end of the tail, as this may reject applicants who are equally qualified as those accepted for admission, especially in view of Singaporean students' high level of motivation and performance in public examinations.

In conclusion, the author made four suggestions:

- 1 Small score differences should not be allowed to influence high-stakes decisions. Instead, other information should be used in addition to test scores;
- 2 Continued research should be undertaken to study the effects and probable biases of feedback and refinement of the test;
- 3 Workshops on measurement should be conducted for university admissions officers and relevant decision-making

bodies; and

- 4 The public should be educated on the policies and conceptual understandings so that they become informed consumers of test results.

A/P Goh Kim Chuan, School of Arts at NIE, shared his views on the influence of SAT test scores on admission to NIE's BA/BSc programmes, especially in view of the increasing number of polytechnic graduates applying for admission. The test scores will add valuable information about their verbal and mathematical reasoning abilities as a predictor of success in their studies at NIE. A/P Poh Sui Hoi raised questions about the reliability and validity of the SAT in the Singaporean context, arguing that more research needs to be done on these issues as the test is implemented. Asst. Prof. Guangzhong Luo spoke about the added value of including the SAT in the selection criteria and recommended that a close watch be kept on the combination of the two selection criteria to ensure that the SAT was a useful addition to the university admission process.

The seminar concluded with a Q&A session.

