



Newsletter | Issue 8 | 2021

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Welcome to the Latest IAEA Newsletter

“Welcome to the first Newsletter of 2021.

It is still hard to believe that we have entered another year of the global pandemic. There are now signs that life in the UK is slowly returning to some form of normality especially following the wide-spread vaccination initiative. Whilst Covid restrictions are beginning to relax, there are still significant challenges ahead as many countries are dealing with the cancellation of examinations this year.



One challenge for the Association relates to the 2021 IAEA Annual Conference. Delayed from last year, it has been decided by the Board of Trustees (BoT) that there will be a distilled, online version of the conference later this year. Those of you who were looking forward to the conference in Mexico City need not be disappointed, however, as the conference hosts (Anahuac University) remain very keen to meet you in person in Mexico City in 2022. More information about this year's online event will be available in this Newsletter and in future updates.

Following an update from the Board of Trustees on personnel changes, meetings and various other activities, Dennis Opposs (IAEA Vice-President) reports on the latest findings of a survey launched by the BoT among IAEA members and other organisations, to gather information about how high-stakes assessments would be carried out in 2020. Further contributions from members about arrangements in 2021 are very welcome!

The Vice-President also reports on the progress of the Recognition Committee and their work on the 'IAEA International Standards for Educational Assessment Organisations'. The Committee is now looking to introduce the draft standards to IAEA members with a view to them joining a pilot to test how well the document works.

Next, Dr. Shehzad Jeeva (Director, Aga Khan University Examination Board and IAEA Trustee) is interviewed by Stuart Shaw on his appointment of Chairman to The Inter Board Committee of Chairmen (IBCC), Federal Ministry of Education and Training, Government of Pakistan.

As a part of our *Educational Assessment: Personal Reflections* feature, Alex Scharaschkin, Director of Research and Regulation, AQA, UK shares aspects of his PhD research – “Using qualitative mathematics in educational assessment”.

Featured in our *Spotlight on Educational Assessment Organisations*, Sarah Hughes (Assessment Research Manager, Pearson) provides a very helpful overview of the mission, purpose and activities of Pearson English Assessment (a division of Pearson Education, the world's education company).

Assessment plays a crucial role in teaching. However, sometimes it seems like educators, students, parents and the general public are on different pages when it comes to their

understanding of assessment. In an insightful interview - which appeared in *Contact: The Teachers' Digest* (from July 2019), Ms Tan Lay Choo, the retired Chief Executive of the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (SEAB) and former IAEA Board of Trustee, talks about issues relating to what constitutes the standard of a good test.

Our penultimate contribution to the Newsletter is from Wafa Al-Yaqoobi (Director, Directorate of National Examinations, Bahrain). Wafa describes a webinar (given 23rd September, 2020) organised by Bahrain's Education and Training Quality Authority (BQA) entitled: "Educational Assessments and its Challenges in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic".

And on a final, sad note we report the death of Professor Godswill Obioma. A valuable member of the IAEA Board of Trustees from 2013 to 2015, Godswill was a celebrated personality at IAEA Conferences and always an active participant in debates at various presentations.

If you would like to contribute or have other ideas to suggest, please contact me:

shawstuard@gmail.org

We would be very happy to receive information relating to general news, past events, news from IAEA affiliated organisations, news relating to grant/scholarship/internship opportunities, professional development opportunities (upcoming conferences, workshops or short courses), and special contributions which can be in the form of an article or short essay featuring research, developments or perspectives on a topic of the author's choosing, relating to educational assessment.

Enjoy!"

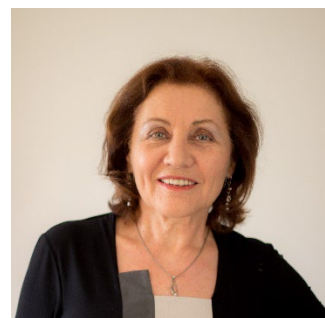
Message from the President

Dr. Anat Ben-Simon

"Dear IAEA member,

Welcome to the latest 2021 issue of the IAEA newsletter!

It has been nearly 9 months since the last newsletter (Fall 2020) came out, a full academic year has passed by and the world is still struggling with the Covid-19 pandemic. While some countries are almost back to normal, others are still battling with the stubborn legacy of the pandemic that affects so many aspects of our everyday lives.



One way or another, many of us have undoubtedly encountered challenges in this past year: logistic, managerial, administrative and professional. At NITE, we have had to account for financial losses, personnel trimming, learning to work from home, adjusting examinations to revised curriculums, transforming printed tests to digital formats, arranging for online

administrations of examinations, and facing government, public and press pressures, complaints, criticism and the like. Well, at least some of the challenges are not all new!

In spite of all the personal and professional difficulties, I do hope that you have emerged from this year, stronger and wiser and above all healthier and ready to face the world with all its new and unforeseen vagaries.

Let us all hope that the pandemic will be over very soon for everyone, and that we will get back our lives and hopefully meet again in 2022.

Board of Trustees Personnel, Meetings and Activities

BoT Personnel changes

The current IAEA Board of Trustees - as of January 2021, is given in the table below. If you wish to attach faces to the names, see: <https://www.iaea.info/about-us/iaea-board-of-trustees/> or the photo below.

President: Dr. Anat Ben-Simon National Institute for Testing & Evaluation (NITE), Israel
Vice President: Mr. Dennis Opposs Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation & Standards (Ofqual), United Kingdom
Executive Secretary: Ms. Anne Oberholzer International Examinations Board (IEB), South Africa
Treasurer: Mr. Nico Dieteren CITO, The Netherlands
Member: Dr. Shehzad Jeeva Aga Khan University Examination Board, Pakistan
Member Mr. Pateh Bah The West African Examinations Council (WAEC), The Gambia
Member Dr. Mary Pitoniak Educational Testing Service (ETS), United States



BoT Online meeting, June 15, 2021

From the Membership Administration

Thanks very much to our members (Institutional, Affiliate, Individual) who have paid their 2021 dues, and prior dues. Several of you have responded to our call for payments, but more needs to be done and many subscription payments are still pending. Most professional bodies rely on income generated from conferences and other related activities in order to further their mission. The IAEA is no exception to that rule and the cancellation of 2020 and 2021 Conferences in Ghana and Mexico obviously means that we need to rely even more on support from our members.

Currently, the IAEA webmaster and webhost are working on the transition from the old membership database to a new system called 'Memberpress'. The new database will allow us to automatise most of the procedures. In the near future we will explore possibilities to link parts of the membership fees payments and administration in the same system. Once all members' details have been migrated, we will invite you to complete a survey and check of membership details.

IAEA 2021 Online Event, 5-7 October 2021

Unfortunately, the pandemic is preventing us from meeting together this year at an annual conference. Instead, the Board of Trustees is producing an on-line event.

The theme of the event will be: *New norms in assessment after the pandemic*. It will consist of keynote presentations and discussion sessions.

The online event will be from Tuesday 5th to Thursday 7th October 2021. To allow participation of members from all around the world, each day the sessions will start at 13:00 (1 pm) UK time and end by 15:30 (3.30pm) UK time. (See www.worldtimebuddy.com for time zone conversion).

The cost of attendance for IAEA members will be 45 USD per person, and 75 USD Non-members. Attendance fees will be used to cover the costs charged by the host platform providers who will handle all the organisation aspects of the conference.

Zoom links for the event will be sent out to delegates following registration.

Please save these times in your calendar. Further details about the event will be shared with members as soon as they are available.

IAEA Hosts Webinar Series

Beginning in October, 2020, the IAEA has been hosting a webinar series. The intent is to continue a scholarly exchange of ideas at a time when in-person conferences cannot be held. The webinars have been very popular, with members attending virtually from around the world. The series has been organized by Dr. Mary Pitoniak, an Executive Director from Educational Testing Service in the U.S. Information on past and future webinars will be available on the IAEA website. You may also contact Mary at mpitoniak@ets.org for further information.

Upcoming IAEA Webinars

Date	Speaker	Topic
July 9, 2021	Dr. Tzur Karelitz Director of Research & Development, NITE, Israel	Rethinking Face Validity: Using Stakeholders' Perceptions for Validation
August 26, 2021	Prof. Jo-Anne Baird Director of the Department & Professor of Educational Assessment; Oxford University, UK	Assessment Paradigms
September 13, 2021	Dr. Avi Allalouf Deputy Director, NITE, Israel	Quality Assurance of Test Scores
Postponed from June 25	Dr. Mafu Rakometsi Chief Executive Officer, Umalusi, South Africa	The tension Between Maintenance of Standards and Empathy During the Era of COVID-19

Previous IAEA Webinars

Date	Speaker	Topic
October 28, 2020	Dr. Paul Newton Research Chair, Ofqual, UK	Validity: The Big Picture
January 19, 2021	Caroline Jongkamp & Nico Dieteren Senior Consultants, Cito, Netherlands	How to Assess Higher Order Thinking Skills? Theory and Practice for e- Assessment Item Types
April 29, 2021	Dr. Xiaoting Huang Director-Examinations, Assessment and Research, Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, Hong Kong	Making Use of High Stakes Examinations to Provide Diagnostic Feedback to Students and Teachers
May 27, 2021	Dr. Randy Bennett Research & Development, ETS, U.S.	Future of Testing in a Post-COVID Era

The Impact of the Pandemic on 2021 Exams Around the World

Dennis Opposs, IAEA Vice-President

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a massive impact on school leaving, university entrance and other high stakes exams across the globe. Different systems have adopted different courses of action - to continue assessments as planned, to postpone them, to replace them or to cancel them. International co-operation amongst the exam agencies having to make and implement these decisions seems very important in these circumstances.

One of IAEA's purposes is fostering communication among assessment organisations throughout the world. As a response to the pandemic a year ago, the BoT launched a survey among IAEA members and other organizations to gather information about how high-stakes assessments would be carried out in 2020. We have 20 countries included, from Azerbaijan to Zambia, with contributions from Africa, America, Asia, Australasia and Europe. The results of the survey are published on the Association's website to permit IAEA members and others to identify organisations that are facing similar problems to their own and see what actions they took. The historic information is available to view at <https://iaea.info/international-approaches-to-exams-given-the-pandemic/>

Now we have opened a similar page for 2021 assessments using a simplified format. You can see the 2021 information at <https://iaea.info/international-approaches-to-exams-given-the-pandemic-2021/>

Further contributions from members about arrangements in 2021 are very welcome. If you would like to add your exams to this information, using the format on the website, please send your text to: Dennis Opposs, dennis.oppo@ofqual.gov.uk

IAEA International Standards: A Call for Volunteers

Dennis Opposs, IAEA Vice-President

Since the 2017 annual conference, a group of us have been drafting for the Association an international standard that provides a set of benchmarks of good practice for organisations which run examinations and assessments.

The present draft of the document is called the 'IAEA International Standards for Educational Assessment Organisations'. The Standards are designed to be used and adapted by educational assessment organisations as they feel appropriate, taking into consideration their own context. They can conduct a self-evaluation in critically reviewing their operations and examination processes to see whether they meet the suggested requirements laid out in the Standards. The intention is that through the self-evaluation, assessment organisations would be able to identify their strengths as well as areas for further improvement. In addition, the plan is that organisations would be able to share their experiences and practices with each other and thereby support each other's development.

The next major step for the authors is to be able to present the draft document to IAEA members and for them to have the opportunity to join a pilot to test how well the document works. Work on this has been delayed because of the cancellation of the 2020 Annual



The Recognitions Committee, January 2020

Conference. We are keen, though, that the momentum we do have is not lost because of the pandemic. We are therefore planning to update members at the 2021 AGM as part of the IAEA online event in October. We are seeking a few member organisations to volunteer to test out the Standards in what we are calling a pre-pilot. In the pre-pilot, volunteers would be able to carry out a self-evaluation using as much or as little of the Standards as they wished. We'd provide some guidance and then ask for feedback to help us see how to improve our document before it is piloted.

If your organisation might be interested in joining the pre-pilot then please contact me, Dennis Opposs (dennis.oppo@ofqual.gov.uk), or anyone else in the team: Maaïke Beuving (m.beuving@cvte.nl), Naveed Yousuf (naveed.yousuf@aku.edu), Shehzad Jeeva (shehzad.jeeva@aku.edu), Stuart Shaw (Shawstuard@gmail.com), Wafa Alyaqoobi (wafa.alyaqoobi@bqa.gov.bh) or Wan Tak-wing (twwan819@netvigator.com).

Interview: Dr. Shehzad Jeeva

Interviewed by Stuart Shaw

Dr. Jeeva is a member of the IAEA Board of Trustees and is the newly appointed Chairman of The Inter Board Committee of Chairmen (IBCC), Federal Ministry of Education and Training, Government of Pakistan.

What is the IBCC?

The K-12 education system of Pakistan is classified as primary (grade 1-5), middle (grade 6-8), secondary (grade 9-10) and higher secondary (grade 11-12) followed by tertiary education. The public sector is the largest education service provider followed by the private sector providing education services to 47.5 million children (60% students in public sector). Due to high dropout rates from primary level and onwards, only around 4 million students appear for high stakes secondary (9th – 10th grades) and higher secondary (11th – 12th grades) examinations every year, which are taken by 33 government examination boards and one private examination board (Aga Khan University Examination Board, AKU-EB). These government and private boards are members of the Inter Board Committee of Chairmen (IBCC), which comes under the Federal Ministry of Education and Training.



The Inter Board Committee of Chairmen (IBCC) was established in 1979 through a parliamentary resolution and its role has been (i) to ensure coordination with all examination boards to maintain minimum standards in assessment and examination; and (ii) to provide

equivalency to foreign qualifications from Cambridge, EdExcel Pearson, International Baccalaureate etc.

How have you been involved/engaged with the IBCC?

I have been a member of IBCC since October 2014. Since then, I have been actively involved as a member several sub-committees of the IBCC. In 2017, I became the Chairman of one of the four groups of IBCC. And now in January 2020, I was appointed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Training, Government of Pakistan as Chairman of IBCC. My efforts in the IBCC has been to encourage the forum to bring in academic discussion and recommend to the government policies to improve assessment and examination in the country.

What does Chairing the IBCC entail?

In 2010, the Government of Pakistan gave autonomy to the Provinces and introduced devolution of power in all matters such as education, health, etc, through the 18th Amendment of the Constitution. As Chairman, it is critical to ensure strong coordination between all the examination boards in making uniform decisions. What I am learning is that one must have a strong ability of diplomacy and patience as each province has their own dynamics and respective ministry that directs the Boards for decision making. It is, therefore, important for a chairman to have a good working relationship with the education ministry of other provinces too.

How is the new role important for your current work at the Aga Khan?

The new role is very significant for the Aga Khan University Examination Board as it helps us to continue to remain aligned to our vision and mission of national impact. The opportunity to work with Federal and Provincial Governments has positioned the Aga Khan University Examination Board as a national asset of Pakistan and it has also provided opportunity to support the government for policy level decision at the national level, which is the vision of our Chancellor.

What impact do you hope to make on the IBCC?

There is a lot to do to bring improvement in assessment in Pakistan. I was of course delighted and honoured to be appointed as Chairman of IBCC, but soon came the COVID-19 crisis. As you know that globally, end of the year exams in many countries were impacted. Pakistan went through a similar crisis. We had to make decisions on high stake examinations, promotion policy, identifying the risks for the next academic year and mitigating those risks. As a Chairman of the IBCC I was given the responsibility to give recommendation to the ministry and a forum (Inter Provincial Education Ministers Conference – IPEMC) where all the education ministers of the country have to make key decisions on education.

Due to capacity issues, the Aga Khan University Examination Board (AKU-EB) of which I am also the Director, played a key role in formulating an evidence-based student promotion guideline as a national policy in response to the COVID crisis.

“The continuity of education of more than 4 million students across Pakistan was at stake,” Dr Jeeva said. “We were asked to create an evidence-based approach that could be uniformly applied by the country’s examination boards to prevent further disruption to students’ education. The goal was a solution based on the principles of fairness, equality and merit.” AKU-EB’s assessment department led by Dr Naveed Yousuf conducted predictive psychometric analysis and Mr Hanif Shariff led his team to assess the operational challenges concerning transcripts and certificates. My role as Chairman of IBCC was to bring all the members of the IBCC forum to bring consensus and recommend a uniform decision to the government (IPEMC). This was not an easy task. There were numerous meetings and attention was given to every small detail to ensure that the recommendation is accepted by all and that there is no backfire from the public.

Our recommendation was unanimously approved by IPEMC and then by the National Command and Operation Centre, chaired by the Prime Minister of the country. The policy was implemented across the country and used to award exam scores and promote students across Pakistan.

It will be unfair not mention the significance of AKU-EB's technical expertise in building support for a coordinated, transparent and fair solution that allowed the nation’s students to continue their education were acknowledged by Federal Education Minister Mahmood.

“The Federal Minister of Education was delighted with the outcome and to see a national-level policy recommendation receive such unanimous support,” Dr Jeeva said. “Other nations have struggled with controversies over results and promotion. The absence of these issues, including no reports of litigation in Pakistan, speaks to the strength of the evidence we were able to marshal.”

What is the future of the IBCC/your future with the IBCC?

IBCC is a very important government institution. It can play a significant role in ensuring improving assessment standards and can become a strong regulatory body in the country. Unfortunately, this year has been a firefighting year against the COVID crisis. The appointment of IBCC chairmanship is for a one-year period, so I am working with the ministry trying to develop strategies to make IBCC a robust and dynamic organization. Hopefully the new chairman will build on it to make IBCC a very strong institution and of course, I will always be there to support the new leadership.

Personal Reflections by Alex Scharaschkin

Using qualitative mathematics in educational assessment

Mr. Scharaschkin is the Director of Research and Regulation, AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance).

The pioneering psychometrician Louis Thurstone described ‘scholastic achievement’ as a *qualitative* phenomenon, but believed it had to be ‘forced’ into a *quantitative* form to allow it to be studied mathematically (Thurstone, 1928).

This assumption underpins the latent-variable models now commonly applied in educational assessment, such as factor-analytic and item response models. Outcomes of interest, such as ‘proficiency’, are regarded as unobservable, numerical quantities, that are inferred from assessment data, and with respect to which a student is measured by locating her on a numerical continuum (a ‘scale’).



Yet mathematics isn’t the study of *quantities*, but rather the study of *structures* more generally. Applying a *quantitative* structure to the study of a phenomenon that isn’t necessarily quantitative may amount to choosing the wrong tool from the toolbox. Indeed, Joel Michell has demonstrated how implausible it is that the construct of *educational achievement in a curriculum domain* should actually have the very particular structure of a *quantity* (a linear continuum) (Michell, 2012).

Non-quantitative mathematical structures, therefore, may provide more valid and useful approaches to analysing some kinds of educational assessments than quantitative models.

An example is the branch of mathematical order theory known as formal concept analysis (Ganter *et al.*, 2005), currently applied in areas such as machine learning and data mining. It uses a mathematical structure called a lattice, which can be visualized as a kind of network, with a ‘bottom’ (the equivalent of ‘no attainment’, in curriculum-mastery terms), and a ‘top’ (the equivalent of ‘mastery’). Locating the value (the position) of a student’s attainment in such a structure is the analogue of the quantitative procedure of measuring it by locating it on a line.

The equivalent of finding scale scores then becomes finding specific ‘formal concepts’: specific *kinds of performances* on the assessment tasks. These are effectively (mathematically defensible) *prototypes* for the small number of ordered outcomes (e.g. examination grades) into which the assessment procedure aims to categorise students’ performances.

Bartl, Belohlavek and Scharaschkin (2018) applied this approach to educational attainment data and concluded that it is capable of extracting well-interpretable qualitative factors that provide insight into students’ performances.

I believe that ‘qualitative mathematics’ has much to offer educational assessment, and could support other approaches, such as machine-learning to categorise constructed responses, that current computing power now makes possible.

References

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For further information, please contact Alex on AScharaschkin@aga.org.uk

Spotlight on Educational Assessment Organisations: Sarah Hughes of Pearson English Assessment

Sarah Hughes is an Assessment Research Manager at Pearson English Assessment.

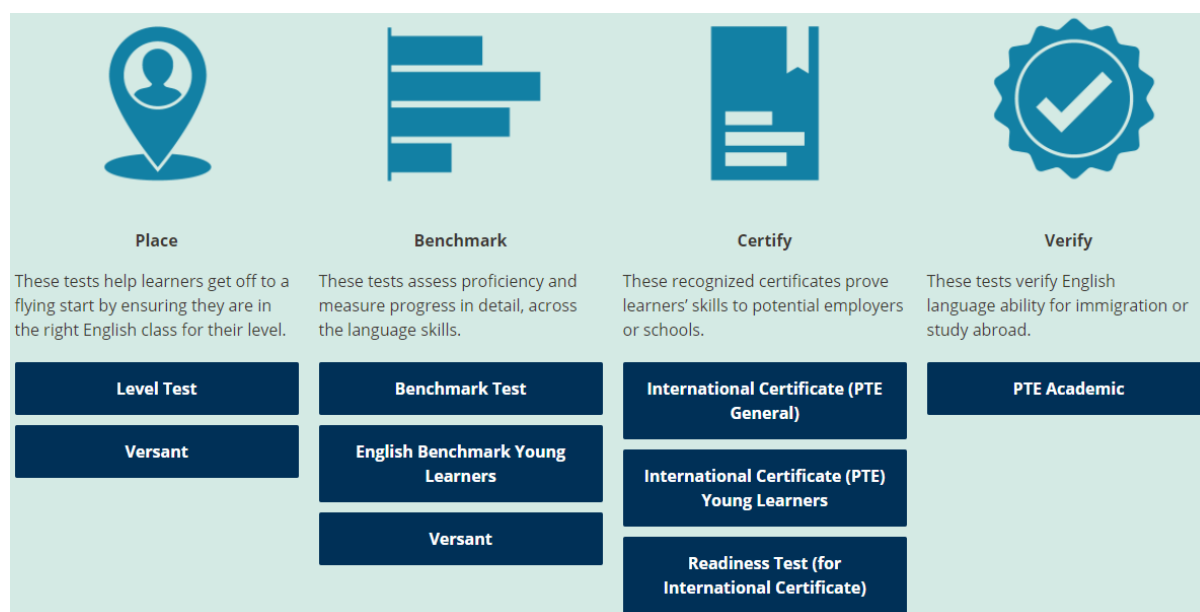
Pearson English Assessment is a division of Pearson Education, the world's education company. Pearson Education's mission is to help people make progress in their lives through learning. Our vision is to have a direct relationship with millions of lifelong learners and to link education to the way people aspire to live and work every day. This takes many forms across our company, combining expert content and assessment, powered by our services and technology.

The Pearson English Assessment team provides technology-enabled assessment across the world for every step along an English language learner's journey.



Our assessment portfolio is divided into four areas based on the purpose of the assessment and the use of test scores. Assessments for placement and benchmarking support learners in identifying their current language level and measuring their progress throughout their learning journey. Assessments for certification and verification are used to provide employers, educational

institutions, and immigration authorities with accurate, reliable, and internationally accepted measures of language ability.



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You can find more information about our research on our website:

<https://pearsonpte.com/organizations/researchers/>

Interview: Ms Tan Lay Choo

Exams Shouldn't Make Children Cry

Ms Tan Lay Choo, the retired Chief Executive of the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board, and a former IAEA Trustee, offers some thoughts on stretching students without demoralising them.

What is the standard of a good test? “As a young teacher in the 1980s,” says Ms Tan Lay Choo, “we were taught that a difficult test is a good test. I took pride in setting a test that, somehow, a lot of my students couldn't do.”



Ms Tan majored in Mathematics, at the then University of Singapore. She graduated and started teaching in 1981. She describes her first batch of students at the Chinese High School as “bright kids”. Allowing herself a wry smile, she continues, “and a good test for bright kids was pretty challenging.”

But only up to a point.

“It was on personal reflection that I realised this is not quite right,” she says. “If I did this as exercises in class, it's good. It's formative when I followed up, got feedback, and gave them feedback. But doing it for an exam, and putting that grade in the report book, that's probably not right. That's not their standard, or the expectation for that level.”

She subsequently spent a bulk of her career working in MOE's headquarters – 13 years planning the curriculum and development of the Gifted Education Programme, two years in manpower planning, four years as Principal of Bukit Panjang Government High, a year as a Cluster Superintendent, and four years as Deputy Director of Psychological Assessment and Research, which included two years' double-hatting as Deputy Director of Psychological Services.

Her last 11 years were at the helm of the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (SEAB). Her appointment as Chief Executive in 2008 coincided with the ‘Teach Less, Learn More’ initiatives steadily rolled out by the ministry, amid growing concerns about Singapore's over-emphasis on academic performance. A national preoccupation that centres around the Primary School Leaving Examination.

Sitting for Ten Years of PSLE Papers

“As a student, I never liked exams,” says Ms Tan. “Even when I was good in math, I got exam anxiety. Being involved in SEAB, the PSLE seemed to be the most painful exam, not just for

kids, but parents as well. I heard about kids crying, I heard reports of ‘killer’ questions, and I wondered, do I really know what the kids experience when they take the test?”

So, when it was time for Ms Tan as the new SEAB chief to review the PSLE papers, she started by setting aside time to “do it like a kid”.

“My first look of the paper is very precious,” she explains. “I time myself to see how long I take to do the tests. I try to read slowly and write neatly. That’s when I see the load. I experience what it’s like just responding to the question.”

In her subsequent reviews of the papers, Ms Tan is looking after all the technical aspects of the one assessment that sums up a child’s six-year journey through primary school. Is it a good question? Is it aligned to the curriculum? Is it in the syllabus? Are we testing language or testing math?

Eventually, she told the exam-setters, “No paper should make kids cry.”

Ms. Tan explains, “If you don’t know that you don’t know how to do a question, you’d give a wrong answer, but you’d still try. But when you’re totally stumped, then you cry.”

She led SEAB to develop PSLE questions that are still challenging, but with invisible scaffolding. “At least, they can get started,” she says. “Kids will feel, ‘I can do part one, just not part two.’ But part one may give them a hint to part two and so on.”

With summative assessments, Ms Tan sees a chance to “make exams a more human experience” instead of treating it as a technical tool, and encourages her staff to see examinations from the students’ perspective.

She says, her role as chief executive of SEAB is not about what she can do for exams, per se. “It’s what I can do for the kids. I never see assessment as an end in itself. It’s a means to communicate to students what they’ve learnt. A human being is involved. We always have to be mindful of this interaction between a person and the exam or test,” she explains.

“At the end of the day, I remind the setters, there’s a kid who is answering your question. This is more than just setting good exams to give a mark or grade to decide on the fate of the kid.”

At age 61, Ms Tan is officially retiring after 37 years in the education service. If the start of her teaching career was marked by the introduction of streaming, her retirement in 2019 takes the journey one full circle, with the phasing out of streaming.

“My Teacher did Subject-Based Banding!”

On the concept of subject-based banding, she has a personal account to illustrate its benefits – from the 1960s.

“Actually, my teacher did subject-based banding,” Ms Tan says, recalling her primary school days, “or something almost like it.”

It was her mathematics teacher, in particular, who had to manage a class of students with varied motivations, capabilities and family backgrounds.

Her teacher would bring three boxes of cards, with math questions pitched at different levels – each box was a different colour. She would teach a concept, and then task the class to take a card from one of the boxes to work on. After solving the math problem (rightly or wrongly), students brought their work to the teacher for marking, and then they would be asked to take another card to work on.

“It turns out that she was differentiating her lessons,” says Ms Tan. “At that time, very few primary school children had gone to kindergarten; some were totally averse to school and tried to run away. That was a skilful way in trying to deal with a wide range of students, systematically. We didn’t feel like the teacher was teaching anyone differently, but she was.”

Ms Tan had been taking cards from the red box.

“One day, my teacher told me, ‘Go to the green box and take another card.’ I went to the green box, but there were no more cards. I’d finished all the cards there.” What her teacher did next was most illuminating.

“She said, ‘Okay, I’ll give you something else to do. I’ll give you a blank card, and you try to come up with a set of math questions that look like the cards from the green box, but change all the numbers. The condition is you must be able to solve them.’”

For Ms Tan, this was a shining example of challenging all the students – and not just some – to be as good as they can be. “I was quite happy making cards for her. I didn’t know I was already setting questions when I was in Primary 4,” she says. “For many years, it didn’t occur to me how significant this was,” she says. “In the sense of how much you can learn from the teacher depended on you, even beyond what she brought to class.”

Like subject-based banding, it is about giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their best effort.

The Next Frontier for Assessment

Singapore’s education system has evolved, so too must assessments. “It is a natural cycle of events,” says Ms Tan. “We’ve developed our curriculum, we’ve grown pedagogy, now there’s a lot of potential to grow our assessment skills.” The next frontier, she says, will be centred around 21st Century Competencies (21CC).

Before the internet, exam-setters were focused on testing for facts and procedures. Examinations, in turn, were the standard for good assessment. “As students, we relied on the ten-year series as a reference point, and some of us kind of became the teachers that did as well,” jokes Ms Tan.

“It’s only in the last decade or so that we talked a lot more about the importance of assessment for learning,” she says, “about using assessment to facilitate learning, and how to differentiate between standardised summative exams versus school-based exams.”

This is more crucial today than before. Not all learning outcomes for the 21st century competencies can be assessed using written examinations only. Competencies such as collaboration and creativity can only be assessed by teachers in the classroom.

Today, these are infused into Singapore's mainstream curriculum under the 21CC framework. What's interesting, however, is that many of these ideas started in the Gifted Education Programme.

The GEP began in 1984, the year Ms Tan got posted to work on it. "We started things like project work, collaboration, research skills," says Ms Tan, "and it pushed us to think about how to assess thinking skills. We talked about skills like 21CC, but didn't call them that."

Over the years, many of these initiatives were cascaded into mainstream schools.

"Today, project work is in every school," Ms Tan says. "When it was first introduced in junior colleges, teachers had to grapple with assessing skills that don't have right or wrong answers. They had to grapple with assessment of work done in groups, looking at student behaviours and oral presentations. It took about a decade for teachers to get used to these things."

In the middle of her posting, she pursued a Master's degree in education evaluation and research at the University of California, Los Angeles. She returned to the Gifted programme, to evaluate and develop it further.

The juice was worth the squeeze. By the early 2000s, Singapore was ahead of the curve. "I remember Hong Kong came to learn from us," says Ms Tan, "and then they introduced independent research as one of the qualifications for a new diploma."

"Subsequently, I hosted the South Australian Certificate of Education, and they introduced a form of project work in their examinations. More recently, Finland's head of the exam board and their equivalent of director-general visited us, too. They were all searching for ways to assess 21CC."

Now that Ms Tan has more time on the personal front, what is on her mind? She is searching for a deeper understanding of one competency that has intrigued her for decades.

"Creativity is still an elusive concept," she says, referring to her interest in Chinese ink painting (a hobby she has maintained for over three decades).

"The process is not very visible even to the artists themselves. If they become too procedural, they won't be happy with their work. They'd say, 'I can produce this one hundred times with the same level of consistency, but I'm not happy with it.'"



I'm always fascinated by the concept, and the best way to understand it is to be involved in the creative field. I'm still in that pursuit. It's about personal creativity and the concept of creativity as a teacher. That's my next personal goal."

"Not all learning outcomes for the 21st century can be assessed using written examinations only. Competencies such as collaboration and creativity can only be assessed by teachers in the classroom."

This interview appeared in CONTACT: THE TEACHERS' DIGEST, a publication by the Ministry of education, Singapore. July, 2019, Issue 34.

Bahrain's Education and Training Quality Authority (BQA) Webinar Conducted in September 2020

Wafa Al-Yaqoobi, Director, Directorate of National Examinations, Bahrain

The Kingdom of Bahrain's Education and Training Quality Authority (BQA), represented by the National Examinations Directorate, held a webinar entitled "Educational Assessments and its Challenges in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic". The online webinar was held on September 23rd, 2020 under the patronage of the CEO of Bahrain's Education Quality Authority, Dr. Jawaher Shaheen Al-Madhki, and a number of educational assessment experts. The webinar had an audience of more than 400 academics, educators, and guests.



The event was mainly a platform for exchanging experiences on assessment especially for online and distance education, the adopted strategies, process, plans, and challenges in light of the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The speakers also discussed how they coped with the requirements of the current situation, and to improve the quality of the distance education system in its various components.

Among the presentations was a working paper by Dr. Abdullah Alqataee, CEO of the National Center for Measurement at the Education and Training Evaluation Authority (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), entitled: "The Online Summative Assessment - Components and Results" in which he discussed their unique experience in the Kingdom during the lockdown as well as "the assessment components, applications and results, in addition to the components of distance assessment operations."

Dr. Alqataee stressed that education and training authorities have to move toward this type of distance assessment, and conduct achievement tests to measure achievement levels,

students' acquisition of knowledge and skills according to an exceptional "new normal" to preserve their safety, health, support at the same time, and supporting them under the current circumstances; explaining that the most important goals of distance educational assessment are for all students to have an equal opportunity. Dr. Alqataee emphasized that it is essential to communicate well with the student's families, to make them aware of the distance assessment requirements and to create the appropriate conditions for the students and the importance of preparing the invigilators to deal with the distance assessments tools and the most critical problems that students may encounter to help them overcome technical difficulties.

Dr. Reem Al-Buainain, Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs at Bahrain Polytechnic, presented a working paper entitled: "Electronic Admission Tests - Bahrain Polytechnic," in which she reviewed the experience of Bahrain Polytechnic, conducting virtual admission tests in an environment that simulates rigor and accuracy in monitoring traditional tests. To facilitate student readiness, instructional films on "how the exam will be conducted" have been sent to applicants well in advance of their test date so that the applicant can prepare for the test, which included online invigilation.

While Mr. Ahmed Assaf, Senior Manager of the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf Region from the Cambridge Assessment International Education, presented a paper on "Cambridge Programs and Qualifications for International Education", in which he explained the programs and qualifications offered by Cambridge in an expanded manner from primary to secondary school (education), pre-university, the assessment processes that are followed, and the efforts made by Cambridge to the virtual assessment programs.

The webinar occurred at a critical time, as many educational assessment practitioners were seeking answers and looking for experience and knowledge on how to deal with assessment under Covid-19. This was evidenced by the overwhelming number of attendees and the huge number of participants from among the region and internationally, which showed the need to re-examine our understanding of the circumstances and processes for future assessment activities.

Obituary: Professor Godswill Obioma

Anne Oberholzer, Executive Secretary



It is with great sadness that I inform you of the passing away of Prof. Godswill Obioma from Nigeria, on 30 May 2021. He was a well-known feature at IAEA Conferences and always an active participant in debates at various presentations. His particular interest was assessment matters in Africa. It is no surprise then that he played an active role in the Association of Educational Assessment Africa (AEAA). He was a valuable member of the IAEA Board of Trustees from 2013 to 2015. He has had a long and distinguished career in education. Some of the highlights were mentioned in the Guardian newspaper in Nigeria.

“Obioma was appointed NECO registrar on May 14, 2020. He was a former Executive Secretary of the Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council. Prof. Obioma has held other key positions in the education sector, among which are: Director, Monitoring, Research and Statistics, National Business and Technical Examinations Board (NABTEB); Director Monitoring and Evaluation Universal Basic Education Programme; Director Monitoring and Evaluation National Primary Education Commission and Head, Department of Science, Mathematics and Technology, University of Jos.”

His lively demeanour and his infectious laugh will be missed at future conferences. On behalf of the membership of IAEA, may his soul rest in peace

Last Word



“The goal of education is not to increase the amount of knowledge, but to create the possibilities for a child to invent and discover, to create men who are capable of doing new things”

Jean Piaget

Contributors to this Newsletter have given their consent to publish their text and photos on the IAEA website.