THE PSC CHAIRMAN'S OPEN LETTER 2013

Mr Eddie Teo, Chairman of the PSC, wrote an open letter on the PSC interview process in 2009.

The aim of the letter was to help ensure that the applicants for PSC scholarships understood what kind of candidates the PSC was looking for.

He has written a second open letter which highlights the value of diversity in the Singapore Public Service. It describes how the PSC has sought diversity by selecting scholarship holders from a variety of schools and backgrounds and sending them to study in different courses and countries. It also elaborates how the PSC guards against elitism and ensures that candidates are selected for scholarships based on a broad definition of merit.

Second Open Letter

1. I wrote my first open letter in July 2009, a year after I became Chairman of the Public Service Commission (PSC). It focused on the PSC interview process and was meant to help ensure that the applicants to PSC scholarships understood what kind of candidates PSC was looking for. We did not want the wrong people applying for the wrong reasons. That would be a waste of their time, our time, and taxpayers' money.

2. After serving one term, and as I go into my second term, I think it is timely for me to issue another letter, with a message for a broader audience. Having interviewed thousands of our top students and having interacted with members of the public, including parents and teachers, my colleagues and I feel that the PSC needs to explain its recruitment role further.

The PSC

3. The PSC oversees the appointment and promotion of key public sector leaders, but does not run, the Public Service. All PSC Members take an oath to serve "without fear or favour" and we take this commitment very seriously, especially when one of our core responsibilities is to oversee discipline in the Public Service. Members come from the private sector and this helps to ensure that the PSC remains impartial and independent. Since Members do voluntary service and have strong personal views, I ignore them at my own peril. Their willingness to challenge me and their fellow PSC Members ensures that the best possible decisions are made, on the recruitment, posting, deployment and promotion of senior public servants. By training, they are quite diverse. There are four accountants, three lawyers, two engineers, one academic, one architect and one medical doctor on the Board. Three of them lead huge, corporate enterprises. Two of the 12 members are women. All major races are represented.

The Value of Diversity

4. The need for greater diversity has grown in recent years because our population and educational system have changed and our national problems are becoming more and more complex. We need a diverse Public Service to avoid "groupthink" and to appreciate the needs of a diverse Singapore population. The demographic composition is moving away from our traditional racial breakdown as more Singaporeans marry foreigners and migrants become citizens.

5. This diversity is beginning to emerge in the students we interview. More schools are being represented because all schools are getting better and more students are willing to choose them. Some students choose to go to the Polytechnic even though they could have gained entry to a Junior College (JC). Students choose to study in the School Of The Arts (SOTA) and the Sports School not because they cannot study, but because they have different interests. We had our first President's Scholar from the Sports School this year, and judging from the high quality of the candidates we interview, I would not be surprised if SOTA or NUS High were to produce a President's Scholar very soon.

6. Our Public Service leaders recognise the need for diversity and realise that future public servants will be more questioning, and have different and divergent views, just like our population. Just as the government is changing the way it governs Singapore, Public Service leaders are learning how to manage a new generation of younger public servants, who want greater participation and more voice. The PSC's effort to bring diversity into the Public Service will come to nought if divergent views are discouraged within the system and those who dare to question assumptions and have a non-conventional perspective are not valued and appreciated.

The Quest for Diversity

7. The PSC has always sought to ensure that public servants should have a variety of expertise and background to help solve the country's diverse needs and problems. The PSC does not force diversity on candidates for diversity's sake. We do not have rigid quotas for different countries, universities or courses, but bear in mind the interests and inclinations of the candidates themselves when making offers. This must be so because our very top candidates today have many other scholarship options available, including bond-free scholarships from some top American universities.

8. In its early days, PSC sought diversity by sending its scholars to study in different countries, as well as in Singapore. Our top scholars studied mainly in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, mostly financed by the Colombo Plan. Some also went to Germany, France, Japan, and later on to the US and China. (The PSC launched the China Scholarship Programme in 2009 and nine scholars from our first batch have graduated and are now doing their Master's in the US.) The attempt to continue to send our scholars to countries other than the UK and the US continues today, and the PSC encourages applicants to consider studying in such "non-traditional" countries. In the last ten years, only about 7% of our scholars studied outside US/UK/Singapore, both as undergraduates and graduates. We would really like to see more doing so. Our scholars should see value in putting themselves out of their comfort zones to gain unusual experiences. They should not regard higher education as an exercise to collect degrees from renowned universities to burnish their CVs.

9. Yet another way of ensuring diversity is to send our scholars to study a variety of courses. Over the last 10 years, 42% studied Econs/PPE[1]/Law, 31% studied Science/Math/Engineering/Medicine, 25% studied Liberal Arts/Other Arts/Humanities & Social Sciences, and 2% studied Finance/Business Admin/Accountancy. We would start to worry if the variety of courses narrows significantly.

10. We also like to see our scholars study in different universities, rather than only in the well-known Ivy League universities or Oxbridge. Public officers are, and have always been, judged by their performance on the job, not by the pedigree of their academic credentials. The Permanent

Secretaries at the top of the Public Service have never come from only the Ivy League universities or Oxbridge. Those aspiring to be public servants should realise that their performance will often be enhanced if they can bring a new perspective to help tackle a public policy issue, gained by their stint in a “non-traditional” university or “non-traditional” country.

Guarding Against Elitism

11. The PSC is also acutely conscious of the need to have public servants coming from all socio-economic classes, lest we end up breeding a class of elitist public servants who lack empathy. While it does not follow that only those with a less fortunate background can empathize with the poor, a Public Service comprising only the privileged and upper classes will add to the impression that meritocracy leads to a lack of social mobility in Singapore. I believe that we should level the playing field for our students to have equal chances of winning scholarships, but the way to ensure this is to help the less advantaged throughout their school lives, starting from pre-school, and not by discriminating against the well-off when they appear before the PSC. Not only is it too late, it will also be harmful.

12. A good proxy indicator of social-economic class is what schools these candidates come from. The PSC continues to reach out to students from different schools and backgrounds in our outreach efforts. These efforts have ridden on prevailing educational changes and broadened our intake of scholars in recent years. Over the last 10 years, 68% of scholars came from RI and Hwa Chong, peaking in 2007 at 82%. In the last two years, they comprised 60% of the total cohort. In 2002, the first Polytechnic student was awarded a PSC Overseas Merit Scholarship. Students from JCs such as Pioneer, St. Andrew’s and Nanyang are also starting to receive scholarships. They no longer rule themselves out from applying, on the mistaken belief that they have no chance. This trend will continue as our top talent continues to spread throughout our schools. There will always be top schools which are more popular than others. There is nothing wrong in this, so long as they continue to take in students from all socio-economic classes, and the overall landscape allows students from other schools a chance to enter and rise to the top in any career, including the Public Service.

13. This emerging diversity has not been achieved at the cost of ability. High standards have been retained and PSC only awards scholarships to those who truly deserve them. We continue to subscribe to meritocracy and do not practise affirmative action or positive discrimination.

Redefining Meritocracy

14. In line with our national education policies and the needs of the Public Service, the PSC has also been refining and redefining our concept of “merit” over the years. Old skill sets public servants needed to help govern Singapore have to be complemented by new skill sets. For instance, superior policy-formulating skills alone are not enough; public servants now need to engage and consult the public and communicate government policies effectively. Our educational system is moving to recognise the need to produce students with holistic abilities rather than only those who are exam-smart. In the early days, the tilt was in favour of awarding scholarships to students who scored well in their exams. Nowadays, the use of psychological interviews and psychometric tests has enabled the PSC to better determine other abilities in our candidates such as Leadership, Intellectual Abilities, Character, Interpersonal Skills, Communication Skills and Stress Tolerance. Despite these tools, interviewing remains an art, with PSC members having to form a judgement on the holistic qualities of a candidate, foremost of which are integrity and a genuine commitment to serve

Singapore and Singaporeans. The PSC must always be able to spot and sieve out the occasional candidate who games the system to apply for our scholarship for all the wrong reasons.

15. However, many Singaporeans still have the impression that PSC awards its scholarships solely on the basis of academic scores. They ignore the fact that in recent years we have had a couple of President's Scholars who did not score straight "As" but had other outstanding qualities which we could not ignore. Some parents even believe that PSC goes back to look at the PSLE scores of the candidates. I would like to assure all parents and students that the PSC has no idea what the PSLE scores of the candidates are. Many students now do not take the "O" levels exams either, and we have no "O" level scores to look at. We also do not care what schools they come from when deciding on whether or not to award a scholarship. Several of this year's President's Scholars came from neighbourhood primary schools.

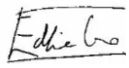
16. Furthermore, the PSC recognises that very often, a public servant is found wanting not because he cannot think, but because he has a character flaw which was not obvious, or even present, when he was first recruited. The development of character is an ongoing process throughout a person's life. The Public Service has to continue to emphasize ethos and values in assessing its officers, and not just focus on outcomes. There are a few tools available. 360 degree assessments are useful in exposing officers who are good at managing upwards but poor in managing sideways and downwards. To develop empathy among its officers, the Public Service has to continue to expose them to operational postings where they can learn about ground problems and appreciate the day-to-day grievances of our citizens.

Conclusion

17. The PSC scholarship system has been evolving as the nation's needs change. In terms of its core goal – that of ensuring that the Public Service gets its fair share of top talent – it has done quite well. Some would say, too well, thus depriving our private sector of its fair share of top talent. But the PSC is looking for qualities that fit service in the public sector, and not all our best and brightest have them. Furthermore, if we see candidates with deep research skills or strong entrepreneurial instincts, we would gladly direct them elsewhere, because the Public Service does not want frustrated officers in its midst.

18. PSC has sometimes been criticised for breeding elitist public servants through its scholarship system. Yes, there are a few scholar public servants who lack humility and have forgotten that they are where they are because of the support and help from those around them. But I have met non-scholar public servants who lack humility and empathy too. More often than not, a person is elitist because of his character and not because he is a scholar.

19. On the other hand, we should continue to celebrate the achievements of our best and brightest, giving them due and appropriate recognition. Only then will we encourage our young to strive for excellence and give of their best. If they are truly our best students, they will not let success go to their heads. They will know that joining the Public Service is a calling and a commitment to serve the public, the government and the nation. It is a privilege, not a right.



EDDIE TEO
Chairman
Public Service Commission
17 Sep 2013

[1] Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE)