



PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION
SINGAPORE

An Open Letter from the Chairman

The PSC Interview

This year, of the 15,000 A-level and International Baccalaureate (IB) students in Singapore schools, more than **2,500** applied for Public Service Commission (PSC) scholarships. To arrive at a manageable number to interview, the PSC took into account their teachers' assessments, academic results and records of their Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) and Community Involvement Programme (CIP). Eventually, some **350** applicants were picked for the interview.

2 Before the PSC interview, every applicant sat for psychometric tests and was interviewed by trained psychologists. The tests are meant to assess the candidate's general, verbal and numerical reasoning abilities and to give a rounded view of his psychological profile. Every short listed candidate who sits for the psychological profile interview will be seen by PSC. Male candidates serving National Service have their reports on their performance in Basic Military Training. The candidates themselves write a short essay on their own values. The PSC panel read all these background papers and reports before meeting the applicants. After the interviews, which stretched over five months, the PSC eventually awarded **84** scholarships.

Award Based On Merit

3 The 84 scholarships were awarded on merit, regardless of the background or socio-economic status of the candidates. They are not bursaries given out to the less privileged. There is no annual quota and the numbers given out each year will depend on the number of deserving and suitable candidates, not on the economic situation. We

do not give out more PSC scholarships just because there is an economic recession and more people want to join the Government.

4 However, while the outcome of the selection exercise leaves the chosen 84 scholars happy, more than 2,400 other students, plus their parents, would have been disappointed. A few schools would have been left puzzled as to why not all their top students were selected. The PSC owes all these people an explanation.

How Are Scholars Selected?

5 Given the amount of resources, time and effort put into the selection of government scholars and the generally high expectations that many of these scholars will eventually reach the pinnacle of the Public Service, it is important to try to explain how the PSC goes about its work. We need to reassure those involved that the selection process is impartial, robust and meritocratic. Not everyone will go away completely satisfied, but we hope that most will understand our decisions better. Who are we? What do we look for? Why do some candidates fail and others succeed? How should students prepare for PSC interviews?

PSC Members

6 First of all, who are we? The Constitution allows for a total of 14 PSC members, other than the Chairman. The Commission presently has 10 members, excluding the Chairman. We have a diversity of backgrounds and experiences. None of us are public servants, although a few of us have public service backgrounds. The diversity gives the Chairman the benefit of different viewpoints before a decision is taken on who is awarded a scholarship.

7 PSC members have different styles and approaches in interviewing candidates. However, we all share a strong sense of responsibility in ensuring that the high standards of the Singapore Public Service are maintained and the long term needs of the service are met. We realise that the decisions we make will determine what kind of Public Sector leaders Singapore will have in 15 to 20 years' time.

8 If the selection of scholars is done well, many, but not all, of our Permanent Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries will be scholars. Scholar public servants who get derailed in their future careers do so for many reasons, some of which have little to do with how they were selected. Some had poor supervisors while others were in a bad job

fit. But the PSC must share responsibility if we miss a fatal character flaw or are misled by false pretences.

What Do We Look For?

Integrity

9 First and foremost, we look for the **integrity** of the candidate. Integrity is vital because while pragmatism may be a key concept for governance in Singapore, it is dangerous to have Singapore governed by public servants who are unprincipled pragmatists. Not everything that works is right or good for Singapore. A person's integrity is best assessed through his behaviour over a period of time. Hence, it is too complex a trait to assess through the interview alone, and we depend on the schools and psychologists to give us a first cut of their reading of the candidate's integrity.

10 Teachers play a very important role and are most helpful to the PSC when they give their honest and candid comments on their students. Their impressions matter because they have first-hand experience of the student over two years. The PSC takes their assessments, both negative and positive, very seriously. However, they should not exaggerate the strong qualities they see in their favourite students as it could be counter-productive, raising our expectations of the candidate when the reality does not fit the hype. Nor should teachers be over-critical just because a student is a bit of a maverick. As long as they do not have a problem with integrity, these are talented outliers whom our system must be flexible enough to fish out eventually.

11 The psychologists are trained to look for signs and indicators that suggest whether or not a candidate has integrity. They can determine whether the candidate has strong values which he is not afraid to express or uphold even against peer pressure. Maintaining one's values is not the same as following rules. The person with integrity will challenge the rules if they go against his values and principles. But how he challenges the rules is also important, for it reveals how shrewd and street-savvy he is and the level of his Emotional Quotient or EQ.

12 During the interview, we judge if what the teachers, psychologists and military officers say about the candidates is accurate and fair. We try to balance the different perspectives of the candidates, bearing in mind that people behave and perform differently in different circumstances. We hope that our overall view is a more rounded and balanced one. The interview also gives the

candidate a final chance to redeem himself if the assessments are off the mark.

Commitment

13 The second most important quality is **commitment**. An 18-year-old can have an interest in a public service career, but it is almost impossible to get a fix on his commitment to the Public Service or loyalty to Singapore because he has not yet started work. In any case, most 18-year-olds know what they don't want, rather than what they want.

14 The candidate's level of commitment in serving the community serves as a proxy indicator for his commitment to the Public Service. How committed is he to his Community Involvement Programme or CIP? What is his reason or motive for taking part in it? Does he truly enjoy serving the less fortunate or is he doing it primarily to make his CV look good? What reasons does he give for wanting to join the Public Service? Do they ring true or is he saying what he thinks we want to hear? Given his character and personality, is he likely to break his bond or stay overseas?

15 Some candidates think that they can demonstrate how committed they are by giving "politically correct" answers and appearing to be pro-government. They fear that being critical of, or sceptical about, government policies or decisions will make them lose points with the PSC. Unfortunately, in attempting to second-guess the panel and seeking to give the "correct" answer, they often end up giving the impression that they have no integrity.

16 There is, of course, nothing wrong about agreeing with and supporting, government policy, but some candidates go to the extent of suppressing their own views in order to impress the panel. It is all right to be critical, even sceptical. Being critical means you care about our nation and want to improve things and correct what you think is wrong. Being sceptical means you are not naïve and do not accept everything you read or hear.

17 The Public Service is not looking for conformists and "yes-men". It is looking for people who have a personal point of view, regardless of current policy. Even a few mavericks - people with unconventional viewpoints who are willing to challenge assumptions – will be useful because they will add vitality and diversity to the Service. We are looking for people who dare to think and question because innovation within Government is possible only when there are public servants who are willing and able to debate existing rules and policies. Just

because the debate does not spill into the public domain does not mean there is no such debate going on internally.

Cognitive & Non-Cognitive Skills

Beyond Academic Results

18 After integrity and commitment, the PSC is of course looking for high quality. A person of integrity and commitment, will make only a limited contribution if he does not have innate ability. We are looking for the ability to analyse issues, to come up with creative ideas, to perceive opportunities, to solve problems, to motivate others, and to get things done. But ability is not measured only by academic results, although academic results do give an indication of the quality of the person. While we do select from students who are at the top in terms of academic performance, our experience shows that above a certain cut-off point, academic results cannot help us differentiate between candidates. We need to look for other qualities, such as leadership and whether he can work with others.

Leadership skills

19 When assessing a candidate's **leadership** skills, we are not only interested to know what leadership roles he took in his co-curricular activities or CCAs but also what kind of a leader he is. His school record will give us an idea of what leadership posts, if any, he held. The psychologists will then probe the candidate to find out what kind of a leader he is. Is he a consultative and nurturing leader or is he an assertive and task-focused one? There is no single leadership model we favour because the Public Service is looking for a diversity of leaders to help manage different problems and situations in an uncertain and unpredictable future.

Intelligence quotient

20 Our psychometric tests measure **IQ** and various facets of the candidate's personality. While IQ is generally not a bad predictor of success in life, it is not the only relevant factor. Which is why some people with very high IQ do not make it in life and may even drop out of society altogether. For our purposes, high IQ and top academic results are not enough. To assess whether a candidate has the potential to make it to the top of the Public Service, we need to look for non-cognitive skills as well.

Emotional quotient

21 Success in both the private and public sectors depends also on non-cognitive or soft skills, which are more difficult to measure but are as important as cognitive skills. **EQ** - the ability to understand yourself

and to interact well with your environment – is increasingly recognised as a vital ingredient for successful leaders and managers. Studies have shown that successful corporate CEOs do not need to have the highest IQ, or even relevant experience, to reach the top and be successful. But without EQ, they often fail.

22 Self-awareness is a very rare attribute. Almost everyone thinks that he knows his own strengths and weaknesses, but most candidates are often wrong in thus concluding. We keep seeing candidates who say their passion is to join a particular profession but clearly have neither the personality nor aptitude for the job they have in mind. They either do not know what the job entails or have poor self perception. The ability to understand and relate to your environment involves competencies such as ability to work in a team or build a network, both vital for a Public Service which strives to discard silo mentality among public servants and get them to think and move as one government.

The Need for Trade-Offs

23 However, no candidate is likely to have all the desirable traits and qualities in equal abundance. All candidates, being human, will excel in some areas and will not excel in one or more of the qualities we are looking for. It is a given that all the candidates we interview excel academically. But because candidates will vary in everything else, the PSC will have to exercise judgement in making trade-offs. This is why recruitment is an art, not a science.

24 The PSC must distinguish between core traits such as integrity and commitment, and traits which can be acquired over time, such as communication skills. The PSC will need to be mindful of the fact that women generally perform better at interviews; they are generally more mature (at 18 years old) and confident and they often speak better than the men. Candidates who come from humbler backgrounds may lack the polished exterior of their more privileged colleagues. We must look beyond appearances to determine the substance and depth of the candidates. A candidate should dress appropriately, but wearing a suit will not score any extra point.

Preparing For The Interview

Know what you want

25 The PSC does not set out to make life difficult for you as a candidate. We ask questions which are related to what you seem to be interested in. If you want to study Economics, you will be asked for

your views on the current economic crisis. If you are involved in environmental issues in school, you will be asked about climate change. If you want to join the Foreign Service, you will be questioned about foreign policy issues. A candidate who wants to be a doctor must expect questions on health care issues.

Tough questions asked

26 While we may ask tough and difficult questions, we have no intention to deliberately trip you up by asking you about subjects remote from your background experience and perceived interest. The better candidates must expect harder questions. If you walk out of the interview room thinking it is a breeze, it could well mean you have failed.

27 We need to ask difficult questions because we are less interested in ascertaining what you know than in finding out how you think and what kind of person you are. It is not so much the facts you know which impresses us, but how nimble and astute a mind you have. For those with weak communication skills, we try our best to tease out your ideas even if your speech is unclear or you speak too fast or too softly.

Don't mug

28 There is no point mugging for the interview. Appearing before the PSC is not like taking an exam. You only have half an hour and a long-winded answer showing off all the knowledge you have on one subject is not going to help. But it is always good to show you are aware of, and have an interest in, what is going on in Singapore and in the world. Hence, please read the daily paper because invariably, someone will ask you what caught your attention in that day's newspaper. Even then, our National Servicemen may have to rush straight from their military camp, so we allow for the fact that they may not have read the papers before coming for the interview.

Be focused

29 It helps if you seem to know what you want in applying to join the Public Service. Those who are more focused and have had internships in Ministries they are interested in, have a distinct advantage over those who come before the panel and say they have no clue what the Public Service is all about. If you wish to become a doctor, please find out who the Minister for Health is. If you wish to be a lawyer, do check who the Chief Justice, Attorney General and Minister for Law are.

Be yourself

30 You only need to be yourself, relax and feel free to express your views. We are not looking for the right answer because many of our questions have no single right answer. If you do not know something, it is better to admit your ignorance than to try to fabricate an answer. Being yourself means not attempting to be what you are not. If you fake your personality, you will tie yourself up in knots and will very soon be found out. If you have no interest in making the Public Service your career and your real motive is only to get funding for an overseas scholarship or to enjoy the prestige of being a PSC scholar, we will know.

31 We are looking for an interesting conversation with you. We will begin to take notice when we hear something genuine and spontaneous being said which reflects your personality. We need to know the real you to decide if you have what it takes to be a good public servant and a potential Public Sector leader.

All the best.

A handwritten signature in black ink, enclosed in a simple rectangular box. The signature appears to read "Eddie Teo".

EDDIE TEO
Chairman
Public Service Commission

24 Jul 09