SAT Revamp Brings New Challenge to Test Prep in China

By Natasha Khan - Mar 27, 2014

A planned overhaul of the SAT is fueling concern in Beijing classrooms and is set to pose a fresh challenge for Chinese test-prep companies seeking techniques to crack the admission test.

The revamp slated for spring 2016 is intended to make the exam more reflective of U.S. high-school work and require students to show critical-thinking skills by analyzing science and history texts. The changes are causing anxiety for Chinese applicants, who often rely on months of cramming at schools of companies such as New Oriental Education & Technology Group Inc. (EDU)

Close to a third of the 339,993 international undergraduate students in the U.S. came from China during the 2012-2013 school year, data from the Institute of International Education show. Chinese prep classrooms have for years used detailed dissections of prior exams, lengthy word lists and canned essays to help even students with limited English fluency master the SAT. A test demanding more critical thinking and analysis of English texts may be harder to decode.

“Right now, Chinese test-prep companies teach the SAT the way they do the gaokao -- by regurgitating information,” said Tomer Rothschild, Beijing-based co-founder of consultancy Elite Scholars of China, referring to China’s own college entrance examination. “The changes will force them to rethink the way they teach it.”

In the new version of the SAT that students will take in two years, scoring will return to a maximum of 1,600 points for math and evidence-based reading and writing, the College Board, which administers the test, said March 5. The optional essay will be scored separately. Most U.S. colleges require either the SAT, or its competitor the ACT, to help determine admission qualifications.

Total Analysis

“Chinese test-takers are much better at the math section, while their scores on the critical reading and writing sections remain very poor,” said Trudie Tejuan Li, center director for the Princeton Review prep service in Shanghai, via e-mail. “That is because critical thinking and analyzing skills are not well-developed with current China educational systems.”
Beijing-based New Oriental is by far the largest of the test-prep companies in China, outpacing local and international competitors, estimates Wells Fargo Securities analyst Trace A. Urdan.

American Classroom

New Oriental’s SAT topic page already has a dedicated section discussing the new exam with videos titled “how to get high points after the reform” and articles where New Oriental teachers dissect the announced changes. In one video “VIP” SAT instructor Zhao Jing urges students to “cherish” the original guide that will be issued with the revamp.

“As it’s a new examination there won’t be many past questions to refer to, so candidates need to make a total analysis,” she says. “We’ll need to figure out the most common test questions, build up a knowledge system and fix commonly made mistakes.”

Students must keep building their vocabulary and expand their reading to include scientific, social, and current affairs essays to catch up with U.S. high schoolers, she says.

The website of Shinyway Education, another Chinese test-prep company, carries an article where four of its star teachers comment on tackling the new SAT. Chinese aspirants may benefit from some aspects, such as no longer having to memorize seldomly used words, its Shanghai campus principal said in the article.

“On the other hand, the disadvantages for Chinese students is that most test-takers haven’t experienced a real American classroom and students may find the vocabulary and words that arise in the test unfamiliar,” the principal said.

New Oriental and Shinyway didn’t respond to e-mailed questions and phone calls.

Longer Classes

While test trainers worldwide may have to rethink materials, prep drills are particularly important in China, the largest supplier of international students to the U.S.

Catherine Kong, a 16-year-old student in Beijing, said the SAT reforms shorten her prep time by half a year and that she has to score perfect before spring 2016 or face the risk of taking the new exam.

“Chinese students rely on training and memorizing to get high scores,” said Kong. “The first year after the reforms, New Oriental and other institutions most likely won’t have templates and sample tests, so the people taking the test right after the reform might be at a disadvantage.”

Only Children
In a culture where parents and students leave little to chance, the uncertainty on the format is causing anxiety, said F. David McCauley Jr., foreign director of college counseling for Beijing’s prestigious No. 4 High School. The Princeton Review has received many phone calls in China from people concerned about the changes, Li said. It plans to have a new global curriculum in place by the beginning of 2015.

China’s one-child policy increases pressure for students to succeed, said Hamilton Gregg, an independent educational consultant who’s been based in Beijing for more than a decade.

“There’s a perception that if their child doesn’t get into a ‘great’ university, they feel like they’ve failed,” said Gregg. “It will be a family event to get money for test-prep classes, to take the test, to go to university.”

China’s Ministry of Education prohibits administration of SAT tests, among other foreign admission exams, to mainland Chinese students inside the country, which means most students must also pay for travel to places like Hong Kong or the U.S. to take the test.

High Scores

The SAT is designed to measure college and career readiness for all students, Kate Levin, a spokeswoman for the College Board said via e-mail, without directly addressing a question on whether foreign students were taken into consideration for the new blueprint. Top Chinese students are likely to continue to get high scores even in the new system, said Rothschild, the consultant.

While the standard prep class in the U.S. is around 25 to 30 hours, classes in China from companies such as New Oriental could be between 150 to 200 hours, according to Rothschild.

New Oriental’s prices are higher than domestic competitors and it generates about $800 to $1,000 a student each quarter for preparation across a range of tests including the GMAT and TOEFL, Wells Fargo’s Urdan estimates.

Ultimately, the changes may be a boon for New Oriental as a move away from memorization of SAT words to focus on context and the ability to synthesize information could lead to more hours in the classroom, said David Riedel, New York-based president of Riedel Research Group Inc., who rates the stock a buy.

Student Rush

Also, there is likely to be a rush of students taking the old test before the new one is introduced, said Rothschild.
New Oriental offers a range of test preparation courses and had total sales of $959.9 million last fiscal year, data compiled by Bloomberg show. SAT prep is likely less than 5 percent of its revenue, said Urdan. The rest comes from books and other educational programs including language training, other test courses, online, primary and secondary school education, according to the Bloomberg data.

“This overhaul is going to make things harder for Chinese applicants,” said Michael J. Novielli, Beijing-based co-founder of Due West Education, which advises Chinese students on U.S. admissions. “But it will give American colleges a much clearer assessment of their performance.”

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