

**NOTES FROM A KNOWLEDGE JUNKIE:
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN UNDERGRADUATE FOREIGN
STUDENT ADMISSIONS**

ONTARIO UNIVERSITY REGISTRAR'S ASSOCIATION
2005 ANNUAL CONFERENCE
February 14, 2005 3:15-4:30 pm

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One of my colleagues at U of T recently forwarded some information to me with a note saying she knew it would appeal to me as a knowledge junkie. She meant it in jest, but I thought “Yup, that’s pretty close to the mark.” Whenever I find myself in a quandary, torn between two or three possible right answers, I almost always find that the solution can be found with more information. Often the reason I can’t determine which of several different viewpoints or conflicting pieces of information is the correct one for U of T, is that I don’t know the rationale for those viewpoints, or the background information on which those pieces of information were based.

No one has time to get complete information before they must make a decision. That would paralyze the decision-making process, which we all know must be faster these days, not slower. We must all live with uncertainty and incomplete information, and make the fairest decisions we can with information we can glean from the best available sources. Fortunately, there are more and more sources of information available to us than ever before. Unfortunately, we don’t have time to research them all, and determine which are authoritative and reliable, before we are forced to make a timely decision on incomplete information.

WHICH RESOURCE CAN WE TRUST?

When we find a resource that we think is authoritative and reliable, it is human nature to want to rely on it completely. This would be a mistake. All resources have limitations. The trick is to realize what the strengths and limitations are of each resource. As but one example, I’m sure most of us use the International Handbook of Universities, published by the International Association of Universities, as a very reliable guide to which institutions are recognized by their country’s relevant educational authority, but do we all realize that it can sometimes take many years for a recognized institution to find its way into the listings (sometimes because of the educational authority’s lackadaisical attitude, sometimes because the educational authority won’t pass on the name until the institution has been around for a few years, and they have had an opportunity to see what kind of graduate it produces, somewhat like the accreditation process for US universities), that the IHU is almost useless for finding and positively identifying many recognized Chinese institutions, that it

is intended to only list “degree-granting universities” however that is defined by the relevant country authority, and that it occasionally lists an institution or two that most credential evaluators consider to be ‘diploma mills’? (for example, Berne University of St. Kitts and Nevis)

Some of you may have heard me discuss another resource in my 2002 OURA presentation – the credential evaluation companies. It might be tempting for some of the smaller institutions to rely on a letter of evaluation from one of these companies for all their foreign applicants, but there are many disadvantages to relying upon this resource too heavily, not least of which it will probably not tell you everything you want to know, and you may become further removed from an understanding of foreign education systems and what tools to use to evaluate them. I won’t go into a full discussion again here. Most of you have already made up your mind on this issue anyway by now. Suffice it to say that I recently saw a listserv posting from an admissions person at a small US university asking whether a certain foreign university was ‘accredited’. She explained that she had been waiting two months for the private credential evaluation company who evaluates all their foreign applications to give her an evaluation, and she couldn’t wait any longer. It took me less than a minute to see that it had been listed in the IHU for decades.

Doing everything the same as the University of Toronto doesn’t make sense either, not just because we may be more or less selective than you are, but because each institution has a different history, mission, and philosophy. A good example of a U of T policy that I would suggest you not follow exactly, is the awarding of 1 credit for each A’ level with a grade of C or higher. This arose in the mists of time at U of T because of the peculiarity of our credit system (5 credits is a normal full year course load at U of T) and someone’s antiquated and incorrect perception that a grade of D in A’ levels is like a grade of D in a Canadian university, for which no transfer credit is normally granted. Most resources indicate now that 3 A’ levels is more closely comparable to a full first year of university degree study in North America, but we continue to award 3/5 of a full year for them. Awarding 1.5 U of T credits for each A’ level would be problematic, especially when GCE boards used to offer Advanced Supplementary level courses (I’m NOT talking about the newer Advanced Subsidiary levels, for which we do not grant any transfer credit), and some (like

Hong Kong's) still do, for which we would then have to grant 0.75 credits. Our credit system could not handle that level of complexity. Besides, I think there is a feeling that awarding a limited amount of transfer credit for what is essentially a glorified secondary school curriculum is enough. And granting 6 U of T transfer credits (more than a full year of study) to someone with four A' levels would be just too horrible to imagine! Until last year, the University of Toronto at Scarborough was enlightened enough to award transfer credit for A' levels at D and higher, because they realized that E, not D, was the minimum pass for A' levels, but they caved in to the larger Faculty of Arts and Science's policy I suppose for the sake of uniformity. Perhaps they also justified it on the grounds that what used to be the Gold Standard of A' levels has been slipping in recent years. I don't know. I offered my advice (unsolicited as I recall) on the matter years ago, suggesting that it should be the Faculty that changes its policy, but I was not directly involved in the final decision, so I am not sure. I offer this example, not to criticize my colleagues publicly, but more to show, as Jim Frey diplomatically puts it, that even knowledgeable experts can disagree on matters of foreign credential evaluation. You will each have to make up your own mind about what policies make sense at your institution, and then (I hope) be not only able to defend it on valid pedagogical grounds, but also be willing to review that policy in light of new information as you acquire it.

I am not a Guru, sitting isolated on the top of a mountain, issuing pronouncements (although some of my e-mails may sound like it). I am a pack rat with a fairly good filing system, and an insatiable curiosity about how things really are, and why, and the good fortune to work at a university that is large enough to allow specialization and that realizes it is in its best interests to allow someone like me to pursue these investigations. The economy of scale may allow U of T to specialize more, but smaller universities have fewer numbers of applications to process. The numbers of applications each person must process may actually be fairly similar, and the proportion of applicants with foreign credentials may also be in the same ballpark, so it behooves each university to devote sufficient resources to ensure the fair evaluation of its applicants' foreign credentials. Increasingly, "resources" means not just ordering each new edition of paper publications as they become available to try to keep up with all the new private universities being created everywhere, but also hiring

enough staff, training them to be able to search the web for authoritative information about the credential they have encountered, and allowing them enough time to do so. Sometimes it takes a whole day of reading opaque, turgid, and jargon-filled writing on some Ministry websites to begin to understand a credential (e.g. New Zealand's new National Certificate of Educational Achievement levels). Even the people who publish the World List of Universities and Other Institutions of Higher Learning admit in their 2004 edition that they are getting much of their information from authoritative websites. Printed books have always been useful. They still often are the best way to get a comprehensive understanding of a country's education system. But certain information in them becomes out of date before they go on sale, and the rapid pace of change in recent years, and all the new post-secondary institutions, has meant that it is much more important for us to be able to access primary web and e-mail sources of information, to supplement the bulk of the information in books that is still relevant.

I am finally getting around to the purpose of this presentation, which is to share information I have squirreled away about the various on-line grade verification systems that have sprung up in recent years, but before I do, I just want to encourage you all to not just monitor the discussion that takes place on various listservs, but to actively participate in it as much as possible. I find my knowledge about world education systems increases when I share it with others, for two reasons. First, I must formulate my thoughts coherently in preparing my reply, which often requires me to do further research that I wouldn't otherwise have undertaken, leading to further useful discoveries, and second, I am sometimes provided with additional useful information by my colleagues that isn't shared with the entire listserv.

ON-LINE VERIFICATION SYSTEMS

I was asked to write an article for inclusion in the January edition of NAFSA's ADSEC e-Newsletter elaborating upon my October 2004 e-mails to the INTER-L and ARUCC-L about Ghana's new on-line verification system for West African Examination Council's Senior School Certificate Examinations. I apologize for boring any of you that may have already read that article, but for the rest of you I'll

briefly summarize what it says and make available handouts of that article which you can take away with you.

Basically, the Ghanaian website <http://ghana.waecdirect.org> operates much like the Nigerian one <http://www.waecdirect.org> that most of us have been using for years. It allows anyone to view an individual student's results if he can enter the correct Index Number, Examination Type, Examination Year (all of which is printed on a copy of the student's report, which you should obtain first, as well as the student's permission to access his results on-line) and a Scratchcard Serial Number and one of the three Personal Identification Numbers (PIN's) contained on the back of the scratchcard, which must be purchased in Ghana for the equivalent of less than 3 Canadian dollars each. We have decided that it is worth our time and effort to arrange for the applicant to provide us with all the required information, and for our staff to access and print out the results from the official website, instead of requiring an official statement to be sent to us by snailmail by WAEC. It may require a little more of our time, but probably not much more, given the previous back and forth discussion that had to take place in order to get documentation in the past that we deemed acceptable, and the payoff in reliability of documentation and speed of delivery outweighs it, given the current small number of applicants. It gives us peace of mind, especially given Nigeria's consistent scoring toward the bottom of the 145 countries ranked in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. If numbers of applications from Ghana and Nigeria increase substantially, and as technology progresses, we hope to be able to arrange for results to be sent to us electronically at the student's request, without our intervention, much as ETS has been doing with us for years with their TOEFL and SAT results, and the International Baccalaureate Organisation, the COPE test, and others. We would probably want a certain critical number to make setting up a system for receiving WAEC electronic data worthwhile, rather than simply viewing and printing the results on a secure website, so we will continue to monitor the situation. We will not accept faxes or e-mailed results, except for possible provisional decisions, even if they purport to come directly from the West African Exam Council, because we cannot be certain of their provenance.

We don't like using NECO (Nigerian National Examinations Council) Senior School Certificate Exam results for admission, when we can obtain WAEC results instead, because we have found that subject-by-subject grade comparisons of the two sets of exams taken in the same year often show huge differences in results. Often, the NECO results are higher than WAEC, but this is not always so. It is very inconsistent. Because the NECO exams were rather hastily introduced in 2000 by a Nigerian government that was unhappy with the low grades being awarded its students by WAEC, and the Nigerian universities refused to use NECO results until they were forced to do so by the government, and there have been several press reports questioning the adequacy of the NECO exam system, we have always insisted that our applicants provide us with their WAEC SSCE results. So far, they all seem to have done both sets of exams. But for those of you who will consider applicants for admission with NECO results, there is also a website on which you can verify NECO results – <http://www.neconigeria.org>

IELTS AND TOEFL ELECTRONIC SCORE REPORTING & FRAUD

IELTS has been operating a score verification website for a couple of years now, at <https://ielts.ucles.org.uk> We have found it useful in verifying photocopies of IELTS reports that applicants have faxed or mailed to us. It is a little cumbersome getting initial authorization to access their website. You have to agree to give up your firstborn if you do not abide by every jot and tittle of the lengthy agreement that you must sign and mail to them, along with a letter signed by the President of your university or someone almost as important. But eventually, after you finally get their permission, access is free and quick. The photograph of the individual is reproduced in much higher quality than is shown on the TOEFL paper report. The photo is even in colour and much better quality than the one on the official paper IELTS report!

I spent a considerable amount of time drafting a long letter to be sent to TOEFL by the COU, outlining our concerns about the large number of cancelled TOEFL results sent to Ontario universities by ETS in 2003 and 2004. At U of T, we have received 58 so far, the most recent one just a few months ago. As far as I can tell, there was a ring of about 7 to 10 individuals who were handsomely paid to take

TOEFL for someone else, six of whom have already been convicted and sentenced to several years in state prison, and are facing further charges in US federal court.

One of the things I suggested TOEFL improve is the quality of the photograph that is reproduced on the official paper report that is sent to institutions. Because we receive TOEFL results electronically, we do not put the paper TOEFL reports we receive in the applicant's file. However, we still feel it is important to receive the paper results, for which we pay extra. We keep them in huge alphabetical piles, because we occasionally need to look at them. In 2003, after I had received the initial warning about possible fraudulent TOEFL scores from McMaster and Waterloo universities, and the first round of score cancellations from TOEFL, I sat down for a couple of days and flipped through every paper TOEFL report we had received that year, looking for similar-looking faces, addresses, and Citizenship. The photograph that appears on the paper TOEFL report is taken by TOEFL on the day of the test of the person who presents himself or herself to take the test. I soon began to find additional suspicious reports, which I asked TOEFL to investigate, and I eventually received many additional cancellations after TOEFL's investigations were completed. What surprised me, as I flipped through the score reports, was overall poor quality of many of the photographs – with low resolution and distortion, often poorly lit tiny heads too far away from the camera to be recognizable. Sometimes it was a complete blur, and you couldn't tell anything about the person in the image, so it is possible that I missed some fraudulent reports.

IELTS' photographs are much better. Currently IELTS is working on a system to send their results electronically to institutions, similar to what TOEFL has been doing for years. It's about time. I, for one, have been asking them to do it for years. They had planned to roll it out in January 2005, but it has been delayed somewhat while they sort out what the appropriate file formats should be, and whether receiving institutions would need the photograph as well as the personal and score details. TOEFL doesn't send the photograph electronically, and I suspect most institutions would find that photos take up far too much space in their database. There may be privacy issues too. Anyway, once IELTS goes to electronic score reporting, they are currently thinking they would eventually like to completely do

away with the hard copy sent to the institution, because it will be cheaper for them, and they assume that it would avoid many of the forgery issues. However, they still intend to issue one score report to the candidate, which could still be altered and submitted to an institution as evidence of English facility. Assuming all institutions receive results electronically some sunny day far in the future, and IELTS decides that paper reports can be discontinued, how will people like me be able to easily sift through photographs of IELTS candidates looking for those with similar faces? We would presumably still be able to laboriously type in each 16 digit Test Report Form (TRF) code, and wait for the report to display, but by then I would have forgotten what the previous photograph looked like, and no side-by-side comparison would be possible unless I physically printed out each report.

If any of you are also concerned about this, you may want to contact IELTS to let them know your concerns before they make any final decisions on this matter, as I have already done. I understand from TOEFL that they have recently investigated face recognition technology and found it to be very expensive and unreliable. TOEFL is considering fingerprinting or retinal scans as additional proof of identification, even though these are also expensive, since the forgery of passports, at least from certain countries, has proven to be possible. Even an FBI agent, who was involved with the TOEFL investigation, said that he had a great deal of difficulty detecting that the forged passport presented by a surrogate test taker was a forgery. I could see the benefit of TOEFL comparing the fingerprint of the individual presenting himself to take the test with its entire database of fingerprints for all previous test takers, hoping to detect people who had taken the test more than once under different names. If TOEFL also provided the fingerprint as part of the electronic score report, I could also see how universities who may have concerns about one of their student's English facility skills despite an acceptable TOEFL score, might want to compare the actual student's fingerprint with the one of the individual who wrote the test, to assure themselves that it really was the same individual. It is an intriguing possibility, and one for which we would probably want a legal opinion before pursuing. By itself, it won't stop all TOEFL fraud, but in combination with the 8 other recommendations I put forward in the COU draft for improving TOEFL security, it could decrease fraud

substantially. I realize that decreasing fraud has to be weighed against increasing the cost of the test too much, and that with the introduction of the Speaking component and other changes to TOEFL happening in September 2005, it may already be pricing itself out of competitive range for many applicants.

TOEFL probably attracts more fraud artists than other English facility tests, just because it is twice as large as IELTS, the next largest test, but I have discovered fraud in other tests, and there have been news reports of IELTS fraud. If IELTS continues to grow, as it will no doubt do through aggressive marketing, it will attract more fraud. I don't think anyone should consider not accepting TOEFL because of possible fraud. Australia's decision to stop accepting TOEFL for university admission a few years ago was reported to be as a result of their concern about fraud, but that reason is highly suspect because IDP Australia, the body that is responsible for branding and recruiting for Australian universities, is also a co-sponsor of IELTS. TOEFL has shown itself to be very aggressive in initiating and assisting the prosecution of those who have committed fraud. It even tried to interest the RCMP in starting an investigation into the Canadian side of this fraud ring, but they were not interested. We will see how TOEFL responds to the letter that I hope is being sent to them from COU.

CHINESE NATIONAL COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMS

Should you require them? If you currently do not, and find that the students you have admitted so far are doing OK at your university, you may prefer to leave right now, before I go into my long explanation about how I look at Entrance Exam results. However, my experience has been that Chinese secondary school results are not by themselves particularly good predictors of success at Canadian universities, especially if English facility skills are not strong. Those of you who do not require the Entrance Exam, especially those who may be willing to accept students from Chinese Upper Middle School Year 3 with averages in the 70's and 80's, may find that many of these students are having difficulty coping with the great educational, linguistic and cultural adjustment they have to make when they come to study at your university. The way I look at it, if you require SATs from US applicants in addition to high school grades, you should

probably require the Entrance Exam from China too. They are both standardized exams that give you a fuller picture of the applicant's academic performance than high school grades alone.

U of T likes to consider itself a pretty selective university, so we have required Chinese Entrance Exams since at least 1983 or so, which is when we realized that the best Chinese universities required them too. Whether we have always interpreted the results fairly is another question. I'm not sure I am interpreting them fairly even today, even though I have much more information about them than we had in 1983. I have certainly done the best I can to keep up with the changes, but even if I read Chinese (which I don't), the gradual autonomy being granted to selected provinces by the central government is making things more confusing, as many of the 30 different provinces and districts in China administer their own slightly or vastly different version of the national university entrance exam. It seems that every couple of years, just when you think you are beginning to understand the system, they change it.

CHINESE UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAM CUTOFFS

As I have said many times, applicants can be the best source of information about their academic situation. They sometimes volunteer information about how good their entrance exam results are, either indirectly by submitting a letter of admission from a university that is known to be very good, or directly by providing an article and translation about what Entrance Exam totals were required in their province for admission to the First Tier universities, Second Tier universities, and so on, for Arts Stream and Science Stream examinees, in the year that they sat for them. In 2002, in response to a request from me for specific cutoff information, the Canadian Embassy in Beijing kindly compiled a partial list of what 4 or 5 provinces required for some of the years 1999-2002. I believe I may have circulated this e-mail to some of you. There were many gaps in this list, but I began to get the sense that there were wide variations in grades required for entry into universities, not only from year to year, but from province to province.

In 2003, I thought I hit the jackpot. An applicant directed me to a website that gave this information for 2003 for almost every province

in China. Then, a couple of months ago, I was led to a website for 2004 by the person in charge of the higher education entrance examination for the Beijing Education Examinations Authority, who was in Canada taking our EMBA program. She came to us asking about the admissions process for Ontario high school students coming into Ontario universities. She found it difficult to believe that we would make our admissions decisions on the basis of secondary school grades alone, without the benefit of either an entrance exam or any kind of standardized exit exams. In exchange for information she was seeking about the Ontario university admissions system, I asked her to provide me with as much information as she could about the Chinese one. In addition to the 2004 cutoffs for all provinces and all university tiers, she provided me with percentile distribution of grade information for the 2004 Beijing exams, which I had never seen before.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH USING FIRST (OR SECOND) TIER CUTOFFS?

As a rule, we often use the entrance requirements of comparable foreign universities to begin discussion about what our admission requirements should be. But as I reviewed the Chinese First Tier university admission cutoffs year after year, a pattern was becoming clearer. Beijing, Shanghai, Qinghai and some others tended to have the lowest requirements for admission. Next were the sparsely populated western and frontier provinces, like Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Yunnan. Most of the densely populated eastern and coastal provinces outside of Beijing and Shanghai had cutoffs that were quite high, and a few, like Henan, ShanDong, and the island of Hainan had cutoffs that were as much as 150 points higher than the lowest province's cutoffs. Why was that? Did it reflect the different levels of difficulty of the exams in different provinces within the same examination year? Maybe somewhat, but until a few years ago the exams were made up centrally, and almost all provinces were required to adhere to the same grading rubric, so this explanation didn't seem to account for the majority of the variation. Most still use central exams, but in 2002 and 2003 Beijing and Shanghai were given permission to design some of their exams - Chinese, Mathematics and Foreign Language - and in 2004 they were given

complete authority to design all their own tests, so things are likely to get even more complicated in the future.

Guangdong has had permission to design its own test for many years, and some other provinces have also been using Guangdong's test recently. It uses a completely different grading scale, with a maximum of 900, and a midpoint of 500. It is unusual, but it is very useful once you have properly plotted out what the scores mean. A given score consistently tells you where the examinee places relative to everyone else who took that exam that year, which is exactly what I want to know. I was sent a verbal description of the grading system, and a U of T Statistics Prof was able to plot a series of points for me from that description, from which I drew a graph. I have included that info for you in the handout. You'll know it's the Guangdong exam when you get Entrance Exam statements with subject grades in the 500 to 700 range as well as an overall total in the same range.

It seems the main reason for the cutoff variation between provinces is that China has a complicated quota system of allocating places at universities. The prime determinant is the number of available places at each tier of universities in each province versus the number of students within that province who are expected to want to enroll that year, although there must be other factors involved too. Cities like Beijing and Shanghai have more places available in First Tier and other universities, per potential student, than does Inner Mongolia, for example, so the cutoffs on the Entrance Exam can be 60 or 70 points lower for admission to a First Tier university for a Beijing examinee compared to an Inner Mongolian examinee (i.e. 491 total points for Science from Beijing in 2004, versus 564 total points from Inner Mongolia). The disparity is even greater for provinces like Hainan. Presumably they don't have many First Tier universities in Hainan, and the population is much larger than Inner Mongolia, so the cutoff difference was over 150 points when compared with Beijing in Arts in 2004 (i.e. 474 total points for Arts from Beijing in 2004, versus 626 total points from Hainan).

It seems to be vastly more difficult for examinees from Hainan to gain admission to Chinese universities than for examinees from Beijing and Shanghai. I see no reason for U of T to follow these cutoffs in deciding who gets admitted from each province. The quota system

has been designed to deal with the supply and demand situation as it exists in China, which is highly variable from one province to another, and I suspect there is a strong political component too.

WHY IT IS FAIRER TO USE PERCENTILE DISTRIBUTION OF GRADES INFORMATION

What I want is very different. I want to be able to select the best students or, at least those who have proven themselves to be solidly capable and likely to succeed at U of T, so I need performance indicators, regardless of which province they studied in. It doesn't make sense to base my admissions decision on the supply and demand situation of a Chinese province's universities, especially when even the most selective Canadian universities are so much more accessible than comparable Chinese ones.

The overall enrolment in tertiary level education of all types in China has increased remarkably in recent years. Using 2001 data, the most recent available, UNESCO says China's Gross Enrolment Ratio is 12.7%, which is a dramatic increase from 7.2% in 1998. But Canada's Gross Enrolment Ratio was 59.1% in 2001, more than four and a half times higher, and one of the highest in the world. I just read a news report that Education Minister Zhou Ji announced that China's 2004 "Gross Enrolment Rate" in universities is 19%. If true, it is an incredible increase in a country the size of China (and I worry that quality of university education may suffer), but it is still less than one-third of the rate Canada has maintained for a long time. This gives an approximate idea of how much more competitive it is to gain admission to a Chinese university than a Canadian one. But once I have adjusted my admission requirements for this overall inequity, why should I refuse students for admission from certain provinces that have for various reasons fallen behind the other provinces in building enough universities to keep pace with demand? I should be more interested in how that student performed relative to all other students who wrote the Entrance Exam in that province that year.

I wish I had percentile distribution of grades information for the Entrance Exams of every province in China, for every year, but that would be a monumental task. So far, I only have them for Beijing's 2004 Entrance Exam and the Standard Grading system used in

Guangdong exams. Beijing's data tells me that, for 2004, the 70% average that I had been requiring as a general rule on the Entrance Exam, represented the 95th percentile of all Arts examinees and the 81st percentile of all Science examinees! In other words, only 5% of Arts and 19% of Science stream examinees were able to obtain an average of 70% (525/750) and above on the 2004 Beijing Entrance Exam. In terms of Ontario Academic Credits, the 2001-2 data (which is the most recent I have been able to wrest from our Ministry), indicates that a comparable level of academic performance would be around 90% - the 88th percentile (I averaged the Chinese Arts and Science streams together). An Ontario grade of 75% is at the 48th percentile of all grades awarded (below the midpoint). An 85% grade is at the 77th percentile (see chart in handout). From Guangdong province I know that in 2004, First Tier universities required a total score of 626, which is the 90th percentile of examinees, and Second Tier universities required 548, or the 68th percentile.

ARE THE COHORTS OF EXAMINEES SIMILAR?

One should not base foreign grade equivalents on percentile comparisons alone. Otherwise, you may be admitting students who would be considered to have failed in their home country. Some exams, like Nigeria's West African Exam Council's Senior Secondary School Certificate, have a failure rate approaching half of all examinees in some years. You also have to take into account whether or not the cohort of examinees are similar. There are many things to consider here, and it becomes very much a judgment call, which you must base on as much reliable information as you can obtain about the foreign school system compared to your own.

From what I have read and heard, I would say that China's secondary schools are far more variable in quality than Ontario's. That is probably one of the main reasons that Chinese universities use the Entrance Exam. They don't trust secondary school grades to give them a reliable assessment of academic knowledge and performance. But not all Chinese secondary school graduates sit for the Entrance Exams. Most go into the workforce. There is a great deal of selection and self-selection that takes place beforehand, weeding out those that do not have high enough grades, enough money, or enough encouragement from their family and teachers to

feel they can consider going to university. They must also pass the provincial Graduation Exam, administered sometime during January to March, depending on the province, to become eligible to sit for the University Entrance Exams. So only a certain proportion of the best and/or most privileged Chinese students sit for the Entrance Exams. I'm not sure what percentage this is.

I think we can all agree that the Chinese secondary school students who actually arrive to study in Ontario universities tend to be very well prepared in Mathematics and Sciences. But these are not average Chinese secondary school students either. They are a select group, even more select than the cohort that sits for the Entrance Exams. On balance, I would say that the cohort of students who sit for the Chinese Entrance Exams are at least comparable in academic performance to the cohort who obtained Ontario Academic Credit final grades, so the percentile distribution of grades information can be fairly compared.

SO WHAT AVERAGE SHOULD YOU REQUIRE ON THE NCEE?

We don't have a really good tracking system at U of T, but most Chinese students I've tracked have tended to do very well at U of T. It is becoming apparent to me that this is because our admission requirements have been far too high. I intend to continue requiring the Entrance Exam results, but I'm going to try lowering them somewhat for the 2004 exams, and track how the students do. In future years, I might try an even lower requirement if they do all right.

As an example, a 63% (472/750) average on Beijing's 2004 Entrance Exams represented the 75th percentile of performance. That is the same percentile represented by a grade of 85% on an average Ontario Academic Credit. Therefore, I would say that a 63% average of the Beijing 2004 Entrance Exams would be approximately comparable in level of academic performance to an average of 85% on 2002 Ontario Academic Credits. An average between the Arts and Science streams was used because the higher percentile performance of the Arts stream examinees is offset by the fact that, on average, they are less academically capable to begin with than the Science stream examinees.

WHAT ABOUT YEAR-TO-YEAR VARIATION?

Another thing to keep in mind is that the level of difficulty on the Entrance Exam varies from year to year for the same province. It is not unusual for individual provincial cutoffs to go up or down by 50 or more points (7%) from one year to the next. Apparently they haven't heard of equalizing exam results, or they prefer not to equalize the exams for some reason, in spite of the confusion and uncertainty caused by this lack of standardization. If I look at the average cutoffs for all provinces for First and Second Tier universities, I find that the average 2004 cutoff was about 6.8% higher than the average for 2003. This tells me that the 2003 exam was on average 6.8% harder overall. Subtracting 6.8 points from the 63% 2004 average, for example, would yield approximately 56% (420/750) for 2003 examinees, which would level the playing field somewhat. My guidelines for earlier years are sketchy because of incomplete data, but will probably fall in between these two extremes.

63% and 56% on the Chinese Entrance Exam don't sound very demanding for admission requirements, but it is a killer exam. As I have explained I believe those averages are approximately comparable in level of academic performance to an 85% on an average Ontario Academic Credit. Those of you who agree with this rationale can work out a lower or higher requirement from the data I've given you.

This formula's main weakness, as I see it, is the extrapolation of Beijing's 2004 percentile distribution of grades information to all provinces and all years. This can only be remedied by obtaining similar data from other provinces and other years. If anyone has or can obtain this data, I would surely love to see it and refine my requirements if necessary. Until then, I hope this explanation of how I look at things has been useful.

WHAT IF AN APPLICANT HASN'T GOT NCEE RESULTS?

Until a few years ago Entrance Exams were written in July. Even though they are now written in June, the results aren't available before our document deadline of June 1 for overseas applicants. We may be able to extend our deadline somewhat for certain programs,

but it may then be difficult for students to arrange for a Study Permit in time for September classes. If we have received acceptable proof of English facility, and all other documentation available to date, I review every application for students currently in their last year of secondary school to see if we can make a provisional offer of admission, pending receipt of acceptable Entrance Exam results.

The other scenario is that an applicant claims his or her Entrance Exams results are "unavailable". We make sure the applicant understands that his or her application may be seriously disadvantaged without them, and that we understand that they are very difficult exams, and make allowances for that. At that point, some applicants say they did write the Entrance Exams, but didn't do very well in them, at least not well enough for admission to the university program they wanted in China. That's why they are now applying abroad. Or they think they may be difficult to obtain. We ask them to provide us with their results and we'll see if they are acceptable to us.

We can expect to begin seeing multiple attempts at Entrance Exams, and examinees older than 25, as the rules changed a couple of years ago to permit this.

I believe between 5 and 10 years ago, certain key universities were given authority to admit no more than a few percent of their entering class without the necessity of an Entrance Exam. Exemptions could be granted on the basis of strong academic recommendations from certain good secondary schools, especially those 'attached' to the university. This practice seems to be spreading beyond this original concept. This year I saw an applicant who had been admitted to a 'zhuan ke' (diploma) program at a recognized but unremarkable university, who submitted a credential showing he was qualified for exemption from the Entrance Exam, but his secondary school average was only in the mid-80's.

In all cases where the NCEE results are missing, I look for other compelling evidence of strong academic ability. This should be as many of the following as possible:

- excellent grades in secondary school

- excellent Year 3 Graduation Exam results
- awards for 'Three Good', Math or other Olympiad participation, etc.
- high rank in class
- school profile indicating school is very good
- anything else the applicant submits to indicate strong academic performance. It is his case to make.

I am fairly demanding when NCEE results are missing, because I believe it is unfair to insist on strong NCEE grades for those who submit results, and then lower the bar for those that don't submit them. But neither do I think it is fair to automatically tell even the best students who may legitimately not have written the NCEE (for example, they emigrated to Canada a month before the exams were held) that they are ineligible, and that they should spend a year enrolled in the last year of high school in Ontario, which would essentially be a repeat of much of what they had already studied in another language.