

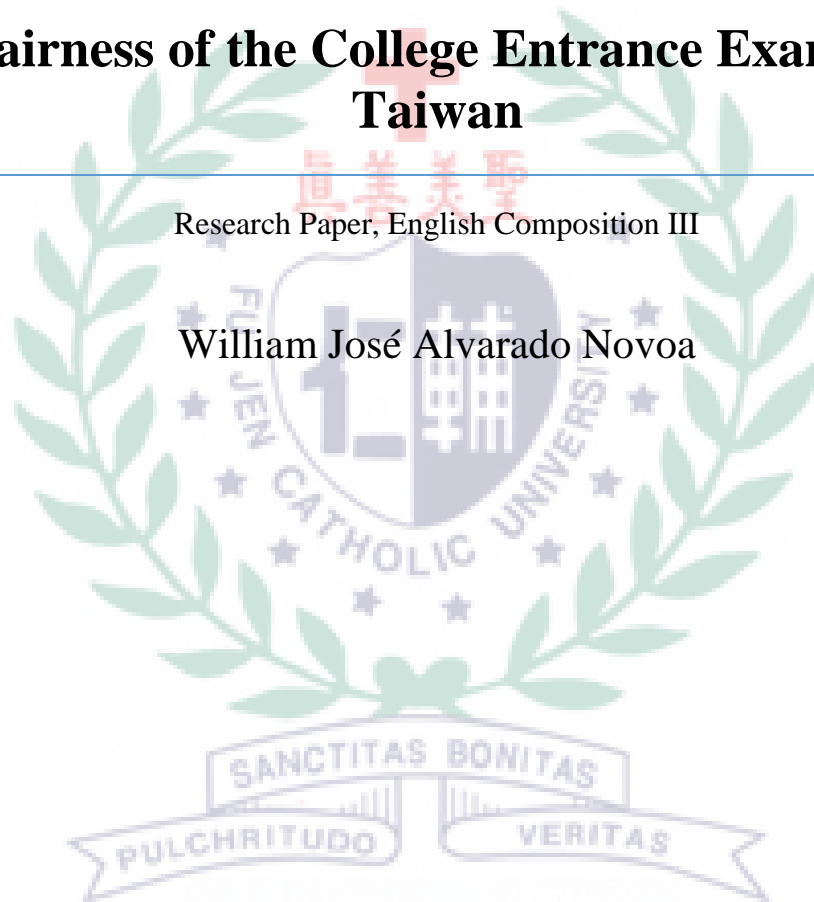
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, FU JEN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

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The Unfairness of the College Entrance Examination in Taiwan

Research Paper, English Composition III

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Outline

- I. Introduction: To Test or Not to Test
 - A. The college entrance examination is mandatory for every Taiwanese student.
 - B. Are standardized tests a fair selection process?
 - C. The conditions in which every student prepares and deals with it are very different.
 - D. Scores are expected to vary due to socioeconomic factors.
- II. Literature Review: The College Admission Process in Taiwan
 - A. The College Entrance Examination Center – Paragraph 1
 1. The General Scholastic Ability Test – Paragraph 2
 - a. The Stars program
 - b. Personal application
 2. Admission by examination and placement
 - a. Advanced Subject Test
 - B. The GSAT and AST as standardized tests – Paragraph 3
 1. The purpose of a standard test is to rank and not to rate. – Paragraph 4
 2. The variance of scores on standard tests is explained by non-instructional factors.
 3. Consequences of the implementation of the GSAT and the AST. – Paragraph 5
 - a. Teachers have changed the focus of their teaching.
 - b. Textbooks are now designed to prepare students for the GSAT and the AST tests.
 - c. The CEEC should reconsider moving to methods that evaluate students' in a more comprehensive way.



- III. The main purpose of Standard tests – Paragraph 6
- A. Standard tests are norm-referenced.
 - B. The content of standard tests is selected in a manner that would allow the test to highlight achievement differences or to classify students.
 - C. The scores obtained in a standard test only show a relationship between the skills and knowledge that students are expected to know with regards to the content of the test.
- IV. The unfairness of standardized tests as a placement methods – Paragraph 7
- A. The scores do not reflect information related to students' performance in relation to educational goals.
 - B. Students' aptitudes and interests are being taken into consideration when interpreting scores. – Paragraph 8
 - C. Students with a more privileged background are more likely to get higher scores.
- V. Methodology: An Interview with Bernard Chien Chiu Li, the president of the CEEC – Paragraph 9
- A. Tests are an important part of Taiwanese culture.
 - B. The College Entrance Examination is a necessity due to the amount of students who want to attend the same university.
 - C. The Ministry of Education ensures that every student is prepared for the test.
- VI. Conclusion – Paragraph 11
- A. Standard tests are designed to rank and show the relation between the content being evaluated and the mastery of it.
 - B. Scores not only affected by students' performance, but by their preparation, which in the end is affected by external factors.
 - C. The College Entrance Examination deals with a matter of quantity rather than quality.

To test or not to test? That is the question. For many years, Taiwanese students have struggled with the college entrance examination, which is mandatory for them to start their higher education and to be enrolled in a University or College. However, there is a negative sentiment towards that exam, since many students claim the test to be unfair because it does not allow them to attend the universities they want to or to study the careers they would love to, and this is due to the fact that they are placed into college based on the scores they obtain in the test. This situation has led many students to want the abolishment of the test based on the argument that it is not fair at all. Before continuing reading, please refer to the first image on the appendix section. After looking at this image for a while, the unfairness of a standard test, such as the college entrance examination becomes more obvious. Not everyone will be able to get a high score or even to pass the test, simply because the conditions in which every student prepares and deals with it are very different. Therefore, a variance in the scores is expected. If this expected variance of scores is being used to decide who studies what and where, then an unfair decision is being taken with the Taiwanese students. The General Scholastic Ability Test (GSAT) in Taiwan is an unfair college placement method because it determines students career path based on a score that is the result of a standardized test, which does not take into consideration their socioeconomic background. This paper is composed by three parts. The literature review, where an explanation of what standard tests are what their main purpose is. The methodology and data analysis, where the findings of a survey administered to a group of Taiwanese and the answers to interview questions to the president of the CEEC are discussed. Finally, the conclusion of the paper.

To have a clearer view of how the GSAT works and the impact that it has had in Taiwanese students' education, one must first be familiar with its development and implementation. According to the College Entrance Examination Center (CEEC), examinations which determined entry to college have been a feature of Taiwan's education for many years. Between 1954 and 1994, the

primary mechanism for students to enter college was by taking the Joint College Entrance Examination (JCEE). This eventually led the Taiwanese government to the creation of a permanent non-profit center which had as its mission to regulate high school and college entrance examinations. Consequently, the College Entrance Examination Center was founded in 1989. Since then, the CEEC, according to the mission established on its website, has been providing valid and reliable examinations that are based on the principles of fairness, trust, integrity and professionalism. Another important responsibility of the CEEC is to conduct research to ensure the permanent improvement of these examinations. As a consequence of this, in 1998 the college admission process underwent minor modifications in response to suggestions from students, parents, high school teachers and colleges, giving birth to the GSAT exam, which is an improved version of the JCEE.

Currently the GSAT allows Taiwanese students to choose three different paths in order to continue their college education. The Stars Program, which was introduced in 2007, is where students are able to enter a specific university based on the grade point average of their last two years of high school, their GSAT test and a recommendation from the high school where they studied (1). However, this particular path can only be chosen by a few who meet the requirements, since it has a limited number of candidates. The Personal Application, which is the second path, is where students, after taking the GSAT and obtaining their scores, and if they meet the requirements by the university and department where they want to study, are invited to a second part of the screening process (1). During this part of the screening process, they might have to take additional tests given by the department, prepare a portfolio, and take part in interviews. The third and final path is the Examination and Placement, which is for students who did not take part in the Stars Program or the Personal Application process, or who failed to gain admission through either of these routes or were dissatisfied with the results (1). Students must take the Advanced Subjects Test (AST)

and after obtaining their results, they fill out a preference list where they indicate their interests in specific colleges and departments.

Since both tests, the GSAT and the AST, are administered to the entire student population of Taiwan, both are considered to be standardized tests, or norm-referenced. According to James Popham, a UCLA emeritus professor, standardized tests are “assessment tools that permit someone to make a valid inference about the knowledge and/or skills that a given student possesses in a particular content area” (1). Thus, a comparison can be made with those possessed by a national sample of students of the same age or grade level. Such relative inferences about a student’s knowledge can be quite informative to parents, teachers and schools, because they are able to spot students’ strengths and weaknesses in particular areas, and therefore determine whether or not students need remedial work or extracurricular classes at home or if teachers need to devise appropriate classroom instruction. In more simple words, standardized tests do provide valuable insights.

However, in the case of Taiwan’s education system, it seems that standardized tests are being used as the sole placement mechanism for college, or as Alfie Kohn, an education critic, puts it, such an important decision, as promotion, is being based on the results of a single test (2). It seems here that the Taiwanese government has forgotten two very important things about standardized tests. First, that “the main objective of these tests is to rank, not to rate; to spread out the scores, not to gauge the quality of a given student or school” (Kohn 1). Second, that there are external factors, such as students’ social environments, in terms of “number of parents living at home, parents’ educational background, type of community, and poverty rate” (1), which are not related to teaching and preparation for the test, that may cause a variation in the scores. Thus, using a standardized test as the primary mechanism for college placement might not be the fairest option for students to be placed into college, as the College Entrance Examination Center intends it to be.

Another important consequence of the implementation of this test is that teachers have shifted their focus of teaching from developing other important areas, such as social interaction and moral values, to developing test-taking and memorization skills. This is due to the pressure put on teachers to raise students' scores, and therefore they might choose to skip or omit certain content from the syllabus, which might not be included in the test. Kohn points out that "the time, energy, and money that are being devoted to preparing students for standardized tests have to come from somewhere" (2). By this, he means that most likely schools are dedicating less time to, if not eliminating, certain programs, which are essential for developing students talents and potential, in the arts, class discussions, debates and presentations, and probably even entire subject areas, which might not be part of the test. This is something that Shuan De Lan pointed out when saying that even text books used by students to prepare for the GSAT are exclusively designed to meet this purpose, where content is no longer displayed with simplicity and ease for students to understand it. Instead, multiple-choice items, simulating the GSAT format, are found at the end of every chapter in many of the books (25). Therefore the GSAT exam, the textbooks that are used to prepare students for it, and teachers' teaching are not taking into consideration the emotional, social, moral, physical and cognitive elements which are attributed to diversity. According to Diane Papalia, these elements are "essential for adequate human development" (75).

All of these facts would be enough for the CEEC to start reconsidering the use of a standardized test for college placement, or as Richard Atkinson pointed out during his lecture at the 83rd Annual Meeting of the American Council on Education, "to move away from admission processes that use narrowly defined quantitative formulas, and instead adopt procedures that look at applicants in a comprehensive way" (138).

The main problem that this paper examines is that the Taiwanese government has been using a standardized test, and it is still doing so, to place students into college, when it is already known,

through research made by expert scholars on the field, that standardized tests are not meant to be used for such purposes. In doing so, Taiwanese students are the most affected ones because their future career paths is being decided on a single score.

According to Linda Bond, a writer for ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), standard tests, or norm-referenced tests as they are also known, are applied first to groups of students that excel in academic performance to obtain sample scores that will later be used as a norm, or standard (2). Later these tests are applied to students at national levels and then the scores of that larger group are compared to the ones of the norm group. Bond points out that “since norming a test is very expensive and elaborate the scores of the norm group are usually used for a long time” (2), which would probably explain why the Taiwanese government has relied on this particular type of test as the sole placement mechanism. The content which is to be evaluated in a norm-referenced test is merely discriminatory, meaning that it is selected in a manner that allows the test to highlight achievement differences or to classify students so that they can be placed in remedial or gifted programs, as mentioned previously. Scores obtained by students give very little information about what they know or can do; they only show a relationship between the skills and the knowledge that they are expected to know with regards to the content of the test. Bond supports this idea by saying that the content used is selected on the basis of how well it can rank students from low achievers to high achievers (3).

Therefore, using the information obtained from a standard test would be unfair, because it is too little to decide where and what a student should study. First, because the test doesn't show how well students are coping with a specific set of educational goals and how well they have performed on each of the educational goals. Second, it doesn't show any particular information related to their aptitudes and interests, which would be very important and relevant to know, especially for the students, who in the end, are the ones deciding their futures. Finally, since the test produces a

dependable rank, the decision of using the score for a matter of placement, does not consider external or non-instructional factors, such as poverty rate, the number of parents living at home, parents' educational backgrounds, and the type of communities where students live. These factors may cause a variance on the scores, and consequently, according to Senator Paul Wellstone, a democrat from the state of Minnesota, "using numbers to place someone into college is a major retreat from fairness, from accuracy, from quality, and from equity" (qtd. in Kohn 3).

Many critics have complained that standardized tests are unfair because the questions require a set of knowledge and skills more likely to be possessed by students from privileged backgrounds, mainly because they are the ones who can afford better test preparations. Kohn mentions that "the discriminatory effect is particularly pronounced with norm-referenced tests, where the imperative to spread out the scores often produces questions that tap knowledge gained outside the school" (3). The future career paths of Taiwanese students is to be decided by this test, so it is easy to understand why students in Taiwan seek for help anywhere they can by getting private tutors, attending cram schools, or attending workshops about test-taking skills. It is no surprise for everyone that all of these alternatives are more likely to be available only in the more developed parts of the country, such as Taipei, Taichung and Kaohsiung, and can only be afforded by families with more economic possibilities.

To verify Kohn's assumption, a survey was administered to a total of one hundred and twenty seven university-level students from different parts of Taiwan. Some interesting findings came to light when a relationship was made between the location, socioeconomic factors, and test preparation of nearly 43% of the respondents that were from the southern part of Taiwan (Tainan, Peng Hu, Chiayi and Ping Tung) and the scores that they obtained in the GSAT exam. First, out of those 54 respondents that were from the southern part of Taiwan, 94% of them live with both of their parents at home and only 6% of them live with one parent at home. This could represent a

potential benefit for the students in terms of emotional stability. It is no secret to anybody that students who live with both of their parents at home tend to have less preoccupations than those who live with only one parent at home or those who don't live with their parents at all. Second, it was also found that 55% out of the 54 respondents from the southern part of Taiwan have parents who were able to finish high school (31%) or did not attend school at all (24%). This particularly shows that there is a higher number of students in the southern part of Taiwan who have less educated parents when compared to students in Central or Northern parts of Taiwan. Third, that the monthly income per family is lower in the southern part of Taiwan. Out of 127 respondents, 54 come from the south, and their families' monthly incomes oscillate between NT50,000 and NT69,999. For the families of the rest of the respondents which come from the Central and Northern areas of Taiwan, 44% have a monthly income between NT70,000 and NT79,000 and nearly 12% have a monthly income higher than NT80,000.

Third, that surprisingly the students from the south are the ones that have less access to better preparations for the test. Out of the 54 respondents from the south, 65% do not get additional preparations for the test other than the ones required by law, which is offered by every public and private institutions in Taiwan. Only 30% of the respondents from the south are able to afford cram schools as an optional and additional preparation for the test, and only 6% of them can afford private tutors. Last, but not least, that the scores obtained in the GSAT by the respondents from the south are also lower. Out of the 54 respondents from the south, 35% obtained a failing score between 31 and 45 points. 53% obtained a passing score between 46 and 60 points, and only 12% obtained a high score between 61 and 75 points. All of this information indicates that even though students from the south seem to have more stable family backgrounds, since most of them live with both of their parents at home, the fact that the majority of them have parents with high school education or less, their monthly incomes are lower than those of the respondents from the Central and Northern parts

of Taiwan. This impacts the ways in which they prepare for the test, and has caused their GSAT scores to be lower when compared to scores obtained by the students from the Central and the Northern part of Taiwan.

At this point, what is already known is that standard tests, such as the GSAT, are specifically designed to create a dependable rank, one that shows only the relationship between the content of the test and a certain level of mastery of that particular content. They are unfair because they might be biased, meaning that high scores might only be obtained by privileged children, and they do not take into consideration non-instructional factors that also contribute to the differentiated set of scores. This, then, makes them an unfair mechanism of placement for college entry, because it doesn't consider students as a whole for such an important decision to be taken. Instead it ranks the students causing that a few lucky ones get to study where they want and what they want, and the unfortunate ones are told where to study and what to study. This leads to the following question: How come the Taiwanese government is still using the GSAT as the sole placement mechanism for college, if there is so much research that shows the unfairness of this type of tests?

In an interview with Bernard Chien Chiu Li, the president of the College Entrance Examination Center, the answer to the previous question came to light. Tests are an important part of Taiwanese culture. There is practically a test for everything and Bernard Li emphasizes such importance in the Taiwanese educational system by saying that "Taiwanese students grow up taking tests; they take tests every day in elementary school; they take tests every day in junior and senior high schools, and of course they are also required to take test prior to entering college, and this will continue during their college years". This may lead one to think that, even though standard tests are proven to be unfair and Taiwanese students manifest a discontent about them, the GSAT is only a continuum to their test taking tradition. However, it is also know that in Taiwan, attending a university is a requirement, more than an option. Taiwanese students do pursue a college or

university degree after they graduate from high school, and if the number of students and the number of universities is taken into consideration, it is easier to understand why the need of ranking students and placing them into college in an orderly fashioned way.

Bernad Li mentioned that because there is more than a million students who want to get into college, and they all want to go to National Taiwan University, so a government-regulated placement method is required because if there wouldn't be a one, universities would not be able to handle the amounts of students wanting to go to the same university. It is important to make sure that all students go to college. By this, Li is trying to indicate that the implementation of the GSAT is an efficient response to the amount of students who want to pursue college degrees and also a way to control the admission process to colleges in Taiwan and to guarantee that everyone will have access to higher education. Bernand Li also mentioned that "in America or other countries, lots of students do not attend college; they prefer to work or travel so the number of students who want to access college is not a problem because these countries have many universities and fewer students, but in Taiwan we have a lot of students and very few universities". By this, Li was trying to suggest that the demand for a seat in college, is higher in Taiwan than in other countries, in relation to the number of universities in Taiwan.

Every student in Taiwan is to take the GSAT exam if he or she intends to enter college, and when Bernard Li was asked if that test was the fairest option for all the students he replied by saying that "The test is the same, that's why it is a standard test, and MOE (Ministry of Education) works hard day by day assuring that all students in Taiwan have access to quality education so that they can be prepared for the test". This implies that the Taiwanese government, according to Li, does make sure that the conditions for every student taking the test are the same, at least within the schools.

However, research shows that standard tests, as mentioned before, are not intended to be used for college placement, they are designed to rank and show the relation between the content being evaluated and the mastery of it. The score obtained in a standardized test is not only affected by the performance of the student, but it also a product of the preparation that the student had, which is affected by external or non-instructional factors, such as the number of parents living at home, parents' educational backgrounds, poverty rates and the communities where students live. These factors can all explain the natural variance of the scores. Therefore, the General Scholastic Ability Test (GSAT) in Taiwan, which might seem to be dealing with a matter of quantity rather than quality, is an unfair college placement method because it determines students' career paths based on a score that is the result of a standardized test, which does not take into consideration their socioeconomic backgrounds.

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Appendix A: Image 1

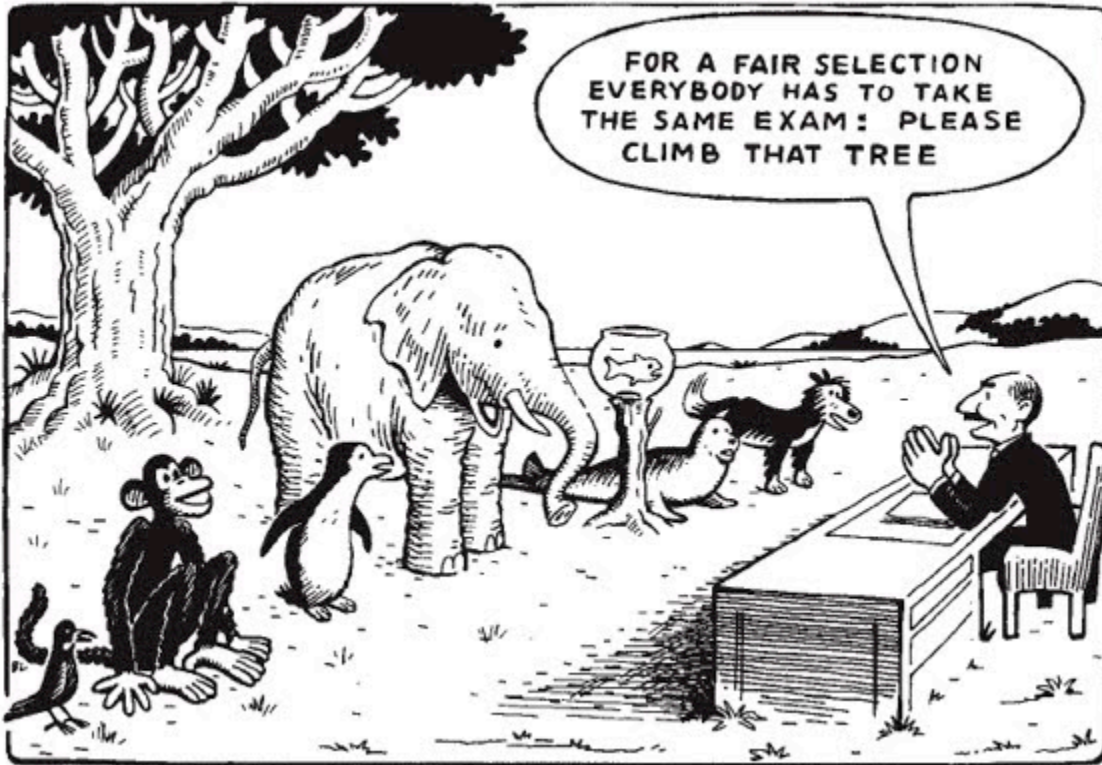
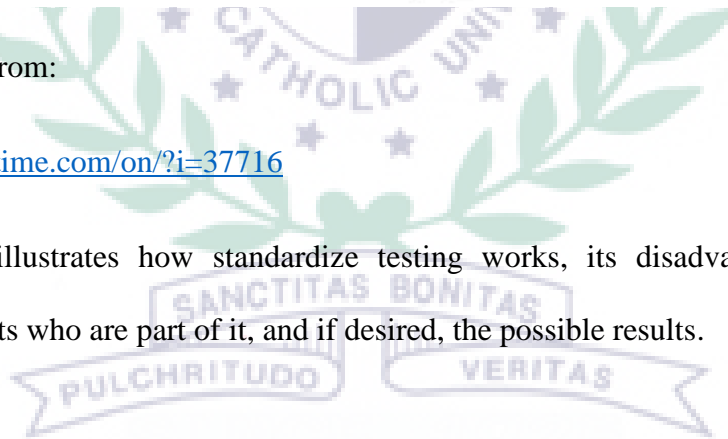


Image downloaded from:

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The image above illustrates how standardize testing works, its disadvantages to the overall population of students who are part of it, and if desired, the possible results.



Appendix B: Sample Survey

External Factors Affecting the Scores of the GSAT

1. What is your gender?

 Female Male

2. Which part of Taiwan are you from?

 Taipei Taichung Kaohsiung Yilan Tainan Chiayi Hualien Peng Hu Ping Tung

3. Where was your high school located?

 Taipei Taichung Kaohsiung Yilan Tainan Chiayi Hualien Peng Hu Ping Tung

4. What type of school did you attend in High School?

 Public Private

5. How many of your parents do you live at home with?

 Two One None (I live with other family members)

External Factors Affecting the Scores of the GSAT

6. What is the highest level of education your parents have completed?

 Did not attend school High School Bachelor Degree Master Degree PhD

7. What is your approximate average household income?

 NT30,000 - NT39,999 NT40,000 - NT49,999 NT50,000 - NT59,999 NT60,000 - NT69,999 NT70,000 - NT79,999 More than NT80,000

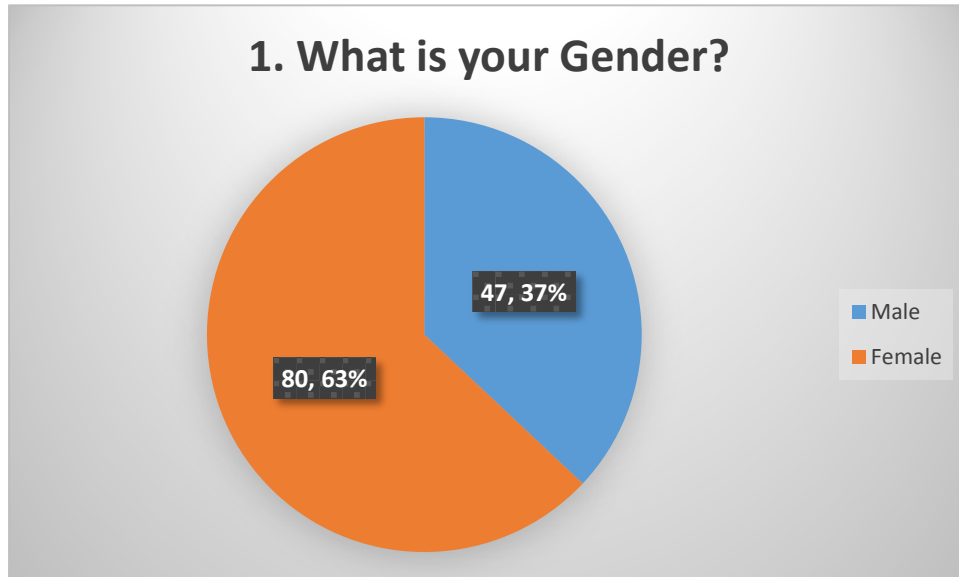
8. What was your score on the College Entrance Examination (GSAT)?

 0 - 15 16 - 30 31 - 45 46 - 60 61 - 75

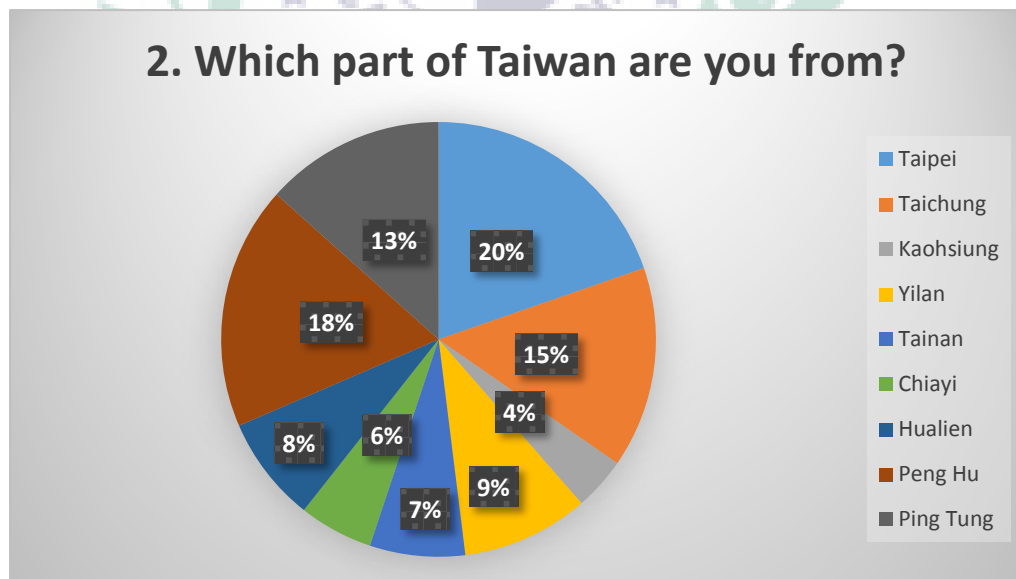
9. How did you prepare for the test?

 Optional reinforcement offered by school Self-study at home Cram school Private Tutoring

Appendix C: Data Analysis

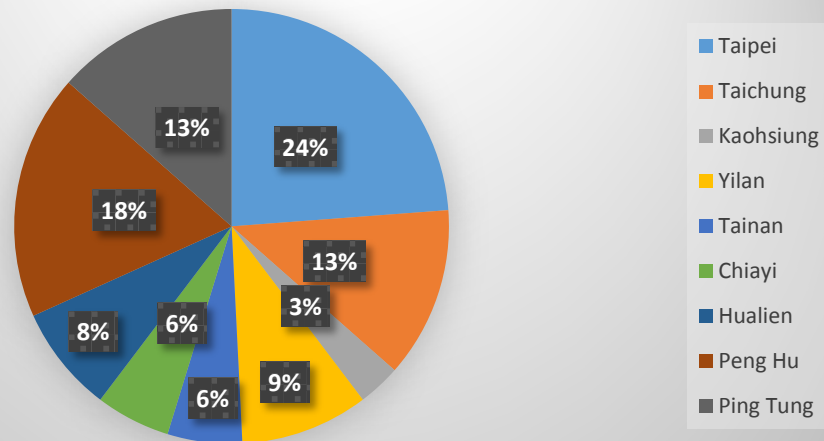


This pie chart shows that out of 127 respondents, 80 of them are females and 47 are males.



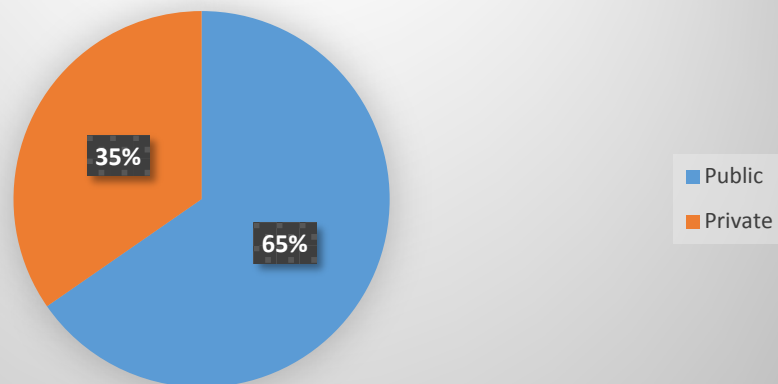
This pie chart shows that 44% of the respondents are from the southern part of Taiwan (Tainan, Chiayi, Peng Hu and Ping Tung).

3. Where was your high school located?



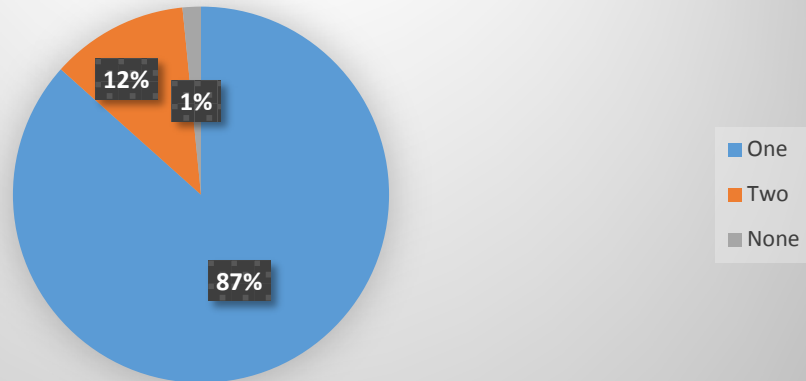
This pie chart shows that 43% of the respondents studied in High Schools located in the southern part of Taiwan (Tainan, Chiayi, Peng Hu and Ping Tung).

4. What type of school did you attend in High School?



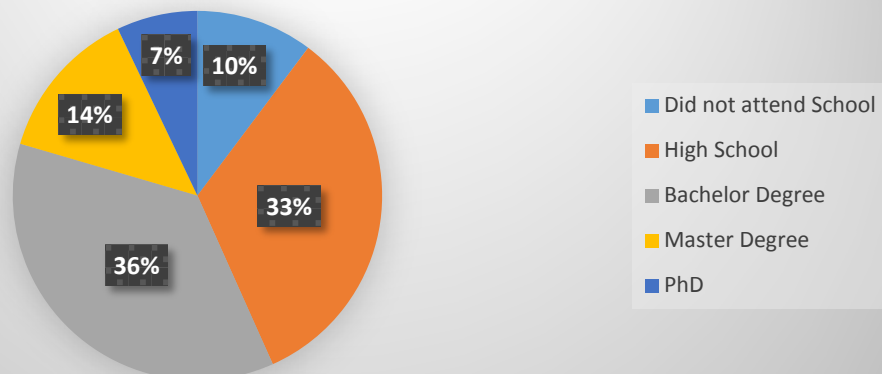
According to this pie chart, nearly three quarters of the respondents attended public institutions. This could be related to their families' monthly incomes.

5. How many of your parents do you live at home with?



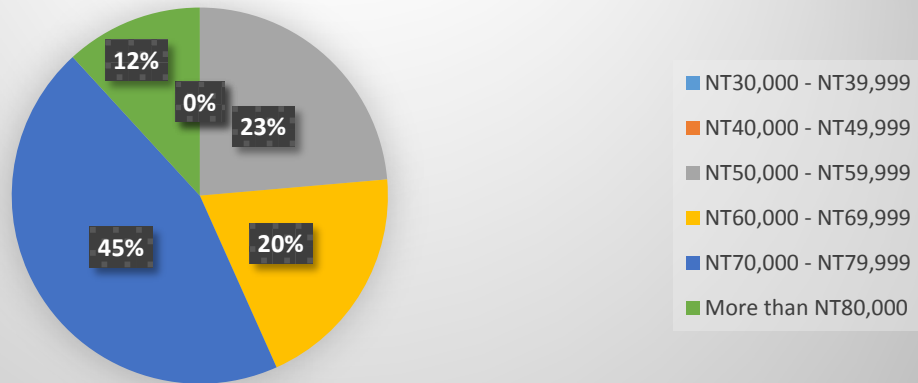
The majority of the respondents live with both of their parents at home. When the surveys were analyzed one by one, it was found that 51 respondents from the southern parts of Taiwan live with both of their parents at home and that only 3 of them live with 1 parent at home.

6. What is the highest level of education your parents have completed?



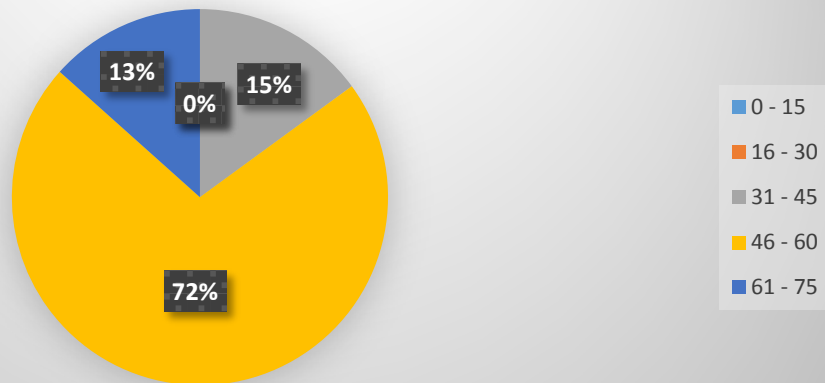
When the surveys were analyzed one by one, it was found that out of the 54 respondents from the south of Taiwan, 24% have parents who did not attend school at all, 31% have parents who only completed high school, 24% have parents with bachelor degrees, 12% have parents with master degrees and only 9% have parents who have doctoral degrees.

7. What is your approximate average household income?



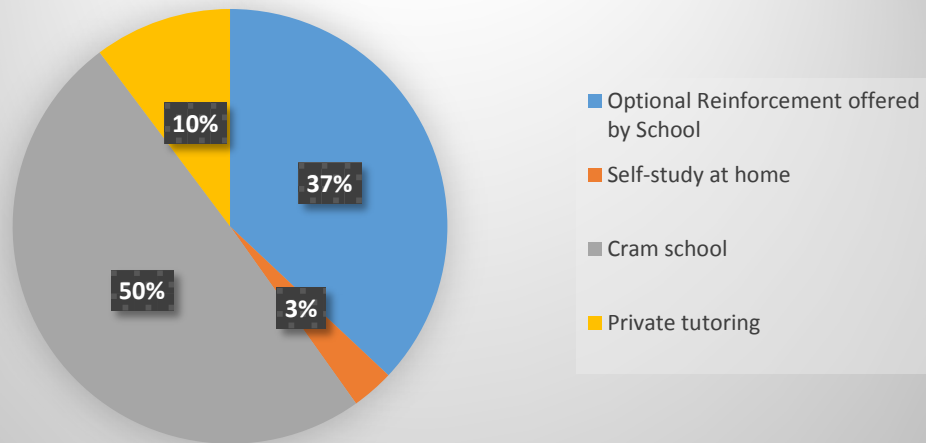
The lowest income was found to be in the respondents from the south part of Taiwan. Out of 54 respondents from the south, 30 of them have families with a monthly income that oscillates between NT50,000 and NT59,999. Only 25 of them have families with a monthly income that goes between NT60,000 and NT69,999.

8. What was your score on the College Entrance Examination (GSAT)?



The lowest scores were also found in the respondents from the Southern part of Taiwan. Out of the 54 respondents from the south, 19 of them have failing scores that range from 31 to 45 points. 29 of them have passing scores that range from 46 to 60 points.

9. How did you prepare for the test?



Out of the 54 respondents from the south, only 13 of them can afford or have access to private tutoring. 16 of them are able to attend cram schools as optional or additional preparation and the other 35 have to prepare for the test in the optional reinforcement program offered by their high schools.



Appendix D: List of Interview Questions

The following questions were answered by Dr. Bernard Li, president of the College Entrance Examination Center, during a personal interview conducted by William Alvarado, an English Major student from Fu Jen Catholic University.

1. As a Taiwanese High School Graduate, what are your options to enter a Taiwanese University? How do these options work?

Dr. Li:

During the last two months of the Senior High School year, all the students in Taiwan must prepare to take the GSAT exam. Those students with excellent grade records, after taking the test of course, can choose the universities and programs of their preference. These students take part in the program that we call the Stars program. They also need recommendations from their schools and teachers. The rest of the students, after taking the test, fill out a list of the universities and the departments which they would like to attend. If the scores obtained matches the ones required by a desired university or program, then they can choose the one they want and start their application process. But it is up to each university to conduct an interview and to finally make a decision about their entrance. This part is called the Personal Application. Students who failed the GSAT, who were not accepted by a specific university, or who are simply sad with their results, must take the AST, and with their scores they get to choose again which universities they want to attend. Every student in Taiwan is guaranteed attendance to university.

2. Are all Taiwanese students required to take a test to be placed in a University? What kind of test is it? Is it a standardized test?

Dr. Li:

Taiwanese students grow up taking tests; they take tests every day in elementary school; they take tests every day in junior and senior high schools, and of course they are also required to take tests prior to entering college, and this will continue during their college years. The GSAT is a standardized test given in a multiple choice format, you know? Where students fill little circles. Every high school student takes the same test. We have different versions, or batteries, sometimes we change the order to stop cheating, but in the end the questions and the content are the same for everybody.

3. What is the General Scholastic Ability Test? How is it designed?

Dr. Li:

The GSAT is the exam Taiwan students take for college. We have another test, the AST, but that is only for students who got bad grades on the GSAT. The test has 30 questions for every class. We test important classes, science, math, history, Chinese, geography, English, physics, chemistry and biology.

4. What kind of questions does it include? Who designs these questions? Who decides which questions are to be included? Is the test designed by specialized evaluators or test makers?

Dr. Li:

The CEEC works with the MOE (Ministry of Education). We sit down and talk about the content and the goals we want students to meet during high school. MOE makes the syllabus for students and we create the test based on what the MOE wants. We work hard to make good and also fair exams. We have great teachers and evaluators in Taiwan, and they all help us design questions for the GSAT. Each question is revised by a group of Taiwan teachers. For the English exam, we have American teachers. They check for us.

5. How is this test used to place students in universities? Does the test take into consideration students' likes and preferences for any particular schools and/or departments? Why or why not?

Dr. Li

All the universities in Taiwan have required scores. If you get the score you need to go to TaiDa or ZhengDa, you go there. But every department also has a score, if you want to study medicine but the score is too bad, then you can't, you have to choose another department. We do this because universities are difficult and want to make sure students can get good grades and pass the exams in college. We want good students. Yes, students fill a list with the schools they want to go, and if the score is good they can go, if not they choose another school.

6. How are the students' scores used to place students into Taiwanese Universities?

Dr. Li:

This is the same question.

7. What happens if a student obtains a low score? (Below 60)

Dr. Li:

If students get below 60, or if they are not happy, they can take the AST. Here they choose which classes they want to test, at least 3. This is to apply only for one department in at least 3 schools. For example, you want to study English. You take English, Chinese and Math; if you pass with good grades you can choose 3 schools, but only the English department.

8. Why is a standardized test the best and most fair option to be used to place Taiwanese students in universities?

Dr. Li:

Because there are a million students who want to study in college, and they want to go to TaiDa, so the Taiwan government needs a way to put all students into college, because if we don't do

this universities cannot manage the amount of students wanting to go to the same university, and it is important to make sure that all Taiwanese go to college. In America or other countries, lots of students do not attend college; they prefer to work or to travel so the number of students who want to study in college is not a problem because they have many universities and very little students. But in Taiwan there are too many students and very little universities

9. Are teachers, parents, and most importantly students happy and satisfied with the implementation of the General Scholastic Ability Test? Why or why not?

Dr. Li:

Teachers are ok. Parents and students think the test is too hard. But maybe they don't study. The test is the same, that's why it is a standard test, and MOE works all day to make sure that all Taiwanese have the best education so that they can be prepared for the test. We always try to make the test better and to prepare teachers. We have a department of research where we investigate the scores of every year to understand our students and for next year to make a better test.

10. Is the College Entrance Examination Center thinking about modifying, replacing, or abolishing, in a near or distant future, the GSAT? Why or why not?

Dr. Li:

We cannot abolish the GSAT. It is the best option for Taiwan, but we can improve it for Taiwan's students. They have to study hard and make their best efforts. This way we wake sure each school gets good students.