

Stories of associations with TIMSS NRCs, NRC meetings, and more

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I first became involved in IEA projects when I was appointed the National Research Coordinator (NRC, previously called National Project Coordinator) of Hong Kong for TIMSS in 1991. As a young researcher in mathematics education, the first NRC meeting in Vancouver was eye-opening. I was not used to attending a meeting where the majority of the participants were not mathematics educators, or not even educators. Many participants there were psychometricians and government officials, but I must add that it was a gathering of a group of very interesting people.

The meeting started with **Tjeerd Plomp**, Chair of IEA and also Chair of the TIMSS Steering Committee, making some opening remarks. Sitting in the audience amongst fellow NRCs, my first impression of Tjeerd was that of a rather cool and withdrawn personality. But after interacting with him more in informal occasions, Tjeerd turned out to be an extremely warm and kind-hearted person. With Tjeerd chairing TIMSS (and IEA), I had the feeling of being a member of a close TIMSS family!

Tjeerd's opening remarks were followed by a speech by the international coordinator of TIMSS at that time and host of this first NRC meeting, **David Robitaille** (now Honorary Member). I was so glad that David, a renowned mathematics educator whom I knew in person, was in the meeting, since I was a stranger to most of the participants. I felt that at least there were people in the meeting who shared my research interest and spoke my language. David started by emphasizing that TIMSS was a research project and not a competition. We all knew this was theoretically true, but true theoretically only! During dinner time, the Norwegian NRC, **Svein Lie** (now Honorary Member) openly joked that TIMSS was not a research project: we joined TIMSS to beat the Germans, the Hungarians, the Americans and the Japanese! Nobody mentioned Hong Kong, Korea or Singapore though, they were not considered strong contestants. One participant even asked me whether Hong Kong was in Vietnam! So you could imagine how surprised people were when the TIMSS results came out in 1996, with Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong (and Japan) topping the participating countries. There must be something wrong with the study! Hence we needed a repeat study, TIMSS Repeat or TIMSS-R, which took place in 1999, to confirm or refute the results.

Talking about Svein Lie, in addition to his talents in telling jokes, he is also very musical. He even composed a theme song for TIMSS: I can still remember the tune. Should we revive that theme song for TIMSS, or even ask Svein to compose one for IEA?

One government official at that first NRC meeting was a quiet gentleman (whose name I have forgotten) who represented the Soviet Union, but in the second meeting he was replaced by a cheerful and outgoing lady named **Galina Kovaleva** (now GA member for Russia and a good friend), and the country that she represented was replaced by one called Russia. NRCs talked about the political changes during coffee-break times. So, these

TIMSS meetings were also venues where we experienced and witnessed major global political changes in a more personal way.

Another politician there was the NRC from Japan, **Eizo Nagasaki san**. He was also a quiet gentleman, and was always well dressed, unlike me who sometimes attended the meetings wearing jeans. What impressed me was that, although he spoke good English, he was accompanied by a personal interpreter. This to me was what a (high-level) politician was about!

Other than government officials, there were a number of psychometricians in the meeting. One who impressed me much was a calm and discreet gentleman named **Rainer Lehmann** (now Honorary Member), the NRC from Germany. During coffee breaks in the Vancouver meeting, I listened with intense interest to what he said about the challenges they faced with the reunification of West and East Germany. News I heard from the TV was now told by someone who was an insider: news became real life events for me.

Another psychometrician present was **Bill Schmidt**, the NRC for the US at the time. He was an interesting and really nice guy, but he debated with virtually everyone who spoke about measurement. He also impressed me as a really busy person, always arriving on the second or third day after the start of the NRC meeting and leaving early. But as I said, he was a really nice guy, and later he invited me to join a number of his other projects. We have remained good friends up to the present.

Then there was a psychometrician named **Jahja Umar**, the NRC from Indonesia. I thought, since Jakarta was not too far away from Hong Kong, he must have taken roughly the same route as I did to come to the meeting: I took a direct flight from Hong Kong to Vancouver. But Jahja told me he travelled via the US and, since he didn't apply for a US visa, he was held in custody while transiting. I was amazed to hear that it took him nearly three days to get to Vancouver, and he took seven meals and watched nine movies on the flights! This unassuming gentleman later became the Minister of Religious Affairs, a very high ranking official in Indonesia who oversees all the Islamic schools in the country.

And then there was a very interesting man called **Marjan Setinc**, the NRC from Slovenia. He was not very outspoken during NRC meetings but liked to crack jokes outside of the meetings. Then at some point he suddenly stopped serving as the NRC (and was succeeded by a charming lady named **Barbara Japelj**), and became a member of the Parliament of Slovenia. Who would have predicted that this unpretentious NRC later became the Ambassador of Slovenia to England!

One of the advantages of being an NRC is that there are lots of opportunities to travel to interesting (and unknown) places around the world and experience different cultures and customs. We joked that while TIMSS tests students' OTL (opportunity to learn), it offers NRCs OTT (opportunity to travel)! I remember one NRC meeting took place in a seaside town in Slovenia, and to get there I needed to first fly from Hong Kong via somewhere in Europe to the capital city of Ljubljana. When I told the travel agent in Hong Kong that I


needed to fly to Ljubljana, she said she had never heard of the place: I was probably the first Hong Kong person to fly to the place, I was told!

One NRC meeting took place in another interesting, and perhaps more well-known, city, Salzburg. The Austrian NRC, **Guenter Haider**, in addition to hosting a chamber concert where superb music was performed, took the whole group to a beer hall one evening. I had never experienced any event such as this before, and it was quite an experience for me. Hundreds of people gathered in a big, big hall doing mainly just one thing: drinking beer, and in an extremely cheerful and festive manner. I liked beer, and I had thought that I was a fine beer drinker who could easily finish half a liter, but this was no match for people in that hall! I still can't understand how their bodies could accommodate so much liquid, even having taken into consideration the fact that most of the people there had big bellies!

Another NRC meeting that I remember vividly was held in Nicosia, Cyprus, hosted by the local NRC **Constantinos Papanastasiou** (Honorary Member who unfortunately passed away in 2012), another quiet and discreet gentleman who was always formally dressed. Thanks to Constantinos' hospitality, we had great food and good wine in Nicosia. NRCs were even given a couple of bottles of wine each to take home as a gift. The social events included a show where the stories of Greek legends were told, and a visit to a Roman remains site, not to mention that we also had a good and serious NRC meeting! Constantinos even hosted a party for all NRCs in his house. This hospitable Cypriot was a gentle and humble scholar who earned my respect and remained a good friend.

While I have been the TIMSS NRC for Hong Kong from the start of the project until now (I must be the only NRC who is here from the first NRC meeting till now), many NRCs have moved on in their career. At the first NRC meeting in Vancouver, the NRC from New Zealand was **Hans Wagemaker** (now Honorary Member). Who would have predicted that he would become the Executive Director of IEA years later and contributed so much to IEA beyond TIMSS? The NRC from Ireland back then was **Mike Martin**, who later as we all know "deserted" Ireland and went to Boston to co-direct TIMSS. And then there was the Australian NRC named **Ray Adams**, who talked a lot about scaling of data in the first meeting. The ignorant young researcher from Hong Kong even debated with him about Rasch model in the meeting, only to learn later that he was the world leading expert in the field.

Other than NRCs, there were many interesting people present who played a role in TIMSS. There was a man from the Technical Advisory Committee by the name of **Andreas Schleicher**, who reported on certain technical aspects of TIMSS. A decade later, Andreas used his technical expertise elsewhere and started PISA with OCED. Then there was **Pierre Foy**, the "sampling guy" from Statistics Canada, who I think must be one of the very few people like myself who has been with TIMSS from the very beginning. My image of a "sampling guy" was someone stern, always monitoring the work of the NRCs and making sure that we "behaved" and drew representative samples of our countries according to TIMSS rules. But Pierre is actually the kindest and most understanding person I have ever met. TIMSS is lucky to have him on the project.



I am aware that I have been saying much more about male than female participants, and so it is now my pleasure to mention some ladies involved with TIMSS. There were many remarkable women involved in the early years of TIMSS, and here I only mention two of them. One was a regular participant in early TIMSS NRC meetings, a lady named **Lois Peak** from the National Center for Education Statistics of the US Government, a very striking woman who was always immaculately dressed. The leaders of the project often conveyed thanks to her publicly for her support to TIMSS, so I gathered that she must be a very important figure. Another outstanding woman was a psychometrician called **Margaret Wu** from ACER. As I mentioned above, there were many psychometricians in the TIMSS meeting, but Margaret struck me as someone who was able to convey profound statistical concepts in easily understandable terms, a skill that is uncommon among established psychometricians! Because of this skill of hers, and of her extremely approachable and pleasant personality, we have become good friends, and Margaret is someone to whom I always turn when I encounter difficulties in my statistics.

Last but certainly not least, back to a remarkable man, **Dirk Hastedt** from the IEA Data Processing Center. He was the expert in all data analysis matters involving TIMSS, and NRCs had scheduled meetings with him on technical matters during NRC meetings. I remember at one IEA meeting in Thailand, I think it was an IEA GA meeting, he was accompanied by his delightful wife and three lovely daughters. When I observed how Dirk interacted with his adored family, I thought he must be a family man who hated traveling. I could not have predicted at that time that he would become the Executive Director of IEA, which, as we all know, involves a lot of traveling!

Well, these are the little stories that I can remember, having served as a TIMSS NRC for more than a quarter of a century. The NRC meetings, and the NRCs that I have associated with, have left so many fond memories, and I am so glad I have been involved in TIMSS all these years. I have learned so much about large-scale testing, and Hong Kong (and I'm sure many other countries as well) has benefited greatly from TIMSS. But behind these "cold" test scores and "hot" rankings, it is these stimulating NRC meetings that have left the deepest and longest-lasting impressions on me. And more significantly, it is the interesting personalities of the NRCs whom I have known and befriended that have left the most memorable traces in my life.