

Ukraine's External Independent Testing Innovation

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As most post-Soviet states, Ukraine introduced a new student assessment system in the last decade. Since 2008, all school graduates who want to enter universities have to take the External Independent Testing (EIT). This was a fundamental shift from the Soviet legacy of corrupt university admission exams, which are replaced by an objective testing procedure. The main aims of the EIT were to combat corruption, increase equal opportunities, provide equal access to high-quality tertiary education, and create a national assessment system to monitor educational quality.

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE EIT

In times of transition and economic crisis of the 1990s and early 2000s, public higher education budgets were radically cut; faculty's salaries decreased below the subsistence level; and wage delays were commonplace. Informal payments and duties compensated the absence of formal funding and became institutionalized at many universities. At certain prestigious institutions, bribes up to \$10,000 were demanded for admission, adding up to an annual admission corruption volume of approximately \$200 million. As the selection of new

students became increasingly based on money, instead of merit, even middle-class families could not afford to send their children to high-quality universities.

Each university had its own admission procedure. Mostly these were nontransparent oral tests that were prone to corruption. In 2008, the Western orientated and reform-minded Viktor Yushchenko government introduced an independent assessment and admission system, similar to the American Scholastic Aptitude Test. The Ukrainian Center for Educational Quality Assessment was established to develop and control the new testing. It introduced a written standardized test that puts the students under same conditions and reduces opportunities for corruption. In contrast to other postcommunist countries, where analogous reforms seem to have failed, the EIT was successfully implemented. For example, in Russia only 16 percent of the population believe that the Unified State Exam (EGE) has reduced admission corruption. Experts as well as the society regard it as the most effective educational reform, since Ukraine's independence. This is remarkable, since the political context after the Orange Revolution was dominated by instability and standstill; but the reform has been carried out carefully and was backed by a broad coalition of then President Yushchenko, the Education Ministry, the international donor community, and domestic civil society.

EFFECTS ON CORRUPTION AND PUBLIC OPINION

The EIT significantly decreased corruption during admissions. Before its implementation, up to every third student was affected by admission corruption; nowadays only 1 percent of Ukrainian students report about corruption during the admission testing. This leads to an improvement in social and geographical

mobility of the students. Because admission became based on merit instead of money or informal relations, universities started to register significantly more students from lower-income households and remote areas. At leading universities in Kyiv, for example, the share of Kyivians before the reform was up to 75 percent—due to corruption and informal agreements. After the implementation of the EIT, their share decreased to 25–30 percent, and students from all over the country and social backgrounds got the chance to study at the top universities of the capital.

These improvements are acknowledged by the majority of the society, as new survey data from October 2013 show: While in the 2008 introductory year, the share of EIT proponents was 42 percent (compared to 34% who did not support the reform), in 2013 already 53 percent favor the new exam (the number of opponents decreased to 25%). The acceptance is even higher in the target group (students and their parents), where 65 percent approve the new system (24% oppose the EIT). Questioned about their personal experiences with the new testing, 68 percent of the target group say they are satisfied with the enforcement of the exam. In addition, 58 percent believe that the new admission system reduces corruption. Current students, who entered university after the reform process, already consider the EIT-based admission system as completely normal.

However, the new system not only had positive effects on corruption. It seems that to some extent corruption has diverted: More and more students complain that now they do not have to pay to get inside the university, but they are extorted to pay for not being expelled. How this problem can be solved still remains unclear.

THE FUTURE OF THE EIT

After the presidential elections in 2010 the political forces in the country changed. The EIT opponent, Viktor Yanukovich, who had promised in his election campaign to abolish the exam, became president. The new education minister, Dmytro Tabachnyk, was also a strong opponent of the EIT. Therefore, it was no surprise when the new government decreased the role of the EIT. New loopholes for corruption and informal procedures in the admission process were the consequence. Students who fear the return of corruption practices initiated an “admission without bribes” campaign.

However, in order to obtain more control, the Ministry of Education is trying even further to decrease the role of the EIT. In the current conflict about a new law on higher education, the ministry and the government support the most reactionary of three drafts. They plan to dispose the EIT for paid university programs and to allow “National Universities” (currently these are 116) to reintroduce their own admission exams again. This draft would definitely lead to a revival of corruption practices. Two more progressive bills are under discussion, one proposed by the opposition, the other by an expert group of academics and members of civil society. In contrast to the governmental bill, these drafts intend to strengthen the EIT. By now, the opposition has agreed to support the bill of the expert group, expecting the government to make concessions too, and agree to the independent expert’s bill.

By now, the dispute considering the new law is ongoing for five years, but an agreement is still not in sight. New political issues—such as, the rejection of the association agreement with the European Union and the following mass protests—overshadow the current political agenda. Thus, the future of the EIT

remains unclear.