

Reforming Admissions in Russian Higher Education

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Currently in Russia a new stage of educational reform is under way: a change in the principles guiding admissions to higher education institutions is being implemented in the form of a few pilot projects in certain subjects. Admissions will be decided on the basis of results in a unified national examination instead of through entrance examinations to specific higher educational institutions. A national examination is a novelty in Russia. The exam is subject-based and conducted before graduation from secondary school and is intended to take the place of final examinations in secondary schools and entrance examination to universities and secondary vocational institutions. The developers of the reform—or modernization, as they call it—claim that the goal is to improve access to higher education for all social groups and create a system for objective evaluation of school leavers' knowledge. There is no doubt that Russian education has failed to accomplish these important tasks, but will the proposed measures succeed in that?

Fee-Based or Free

In contemporary Russia the issue of equal opportunities for obtaining higher education is virtually reduced to the issue of free versus paid education. In a country where the majority of the population consists of low-income families and where government underfinances education, it would be dangerous to couple results of the national test with funding as is the case in the current pilot projects. Depending on the test scores, school leavers will receive an individual state grant (GIFO) that provides varying amounts of federal funding for higher education. In this approach to reforming the financing of education, institutions that attract greater numbers of good students (with high scores) will obtain more federal financing (through the large GIFO grants those students qualify for). The results of the national examination will decide whether a student studies for free or has to pay a fee.

According to statistics, about 50 percent of students now pay for higher education (as opposed to 15 percent in 1995). The new admissions scheme will not only help to stop this trend from growing but will also decrease the size of the paid sector of higher education to about 35 to 40 percent. The reformers believe that the proposed measures will definitely promote social justice, to ensure that any qualified secondary school graduate will be able to attend a good university. Unfortunately, current state

funding levels are not adequate to finance the GIFO plan, which could result in the government's refusal to provide free higher education as stipulated in the law (170 students per 10,000). The GIFO plan raises many questions, but regarding admissions the major one is that it does not provide free education for even the most gifted students. Unable to finance higher education, the state tries to implement half-measures.

Redirected Family Finances

Today admission to higher education is a great concern for the educational community, families, and the government. Sometimes the process appears less a competition over students than over wallets, especially when it comes to prestigious universities.

Families have to spend a lot for higher education, for the preparation classes, private tutors, or bribes, which makes higher education accessible only to those who can afford the expense. The proposed reform seems to fail when it comes to access: the money will just be redirected to other people or to institutions preparing students for the national examination. It should be noted that testing as a method of assessing students' knowledge is quite new in Russia and is met with skepticism: what knowledge and abilities do the tests measure, how and by whom will the tests be composed, and who will have knowledge in advance of the tests' contents. All this leaves the problem of corruption unresolved, while just changing its location. No doubt a whole new industry will arise to provide test preparation, changing the traditional channel of profits from universities and private tutors to ministry officials or other entities. In fact, an analysis of the situation suggests that modernization is only a way of redistributing finances. If we look at the actors in the battle, the authors of the reform are economists working for the government and Ministry of Education officials. Their opponents, who disagree with the program, are rectors of higher education institutions who have had some success, managed to survive the economic crisis of the 1990s, and for many years controlled latent financial streams in education, including those connected to admissions.

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Equal Opportunity

Most of the population now believes that higher education plays an important role in the life of the younger

generation. Likewise, of the generation that obtained its higher education during the Soviet period and then had to change professions or even take low-skilled jobs in post-Soviet Russia, a significant part thinks that higher education represents a chance to get an interesting and well-paying job. Maybe that explains why 1.23 million of the 1.3 million graduates of secondary school enrolled in higher education institutions last year. In a transitional society such as Russia higher education's strategic importance rises as people recognize the need to return to higher education for a "better" education, one that is more specialized and market oriented.

Equal opportunity with regard to education is an ideal a society should aspire to. However, we should distinguish between higher education in general and relevant higher education. Russian universities are quite differentiated, ranging from the elite to the low quality. Who will obtain an education oriented to the current context is an important question. Of course, what constitutes a relevant education is problematic in such an unstable society. As yet it has not been decided what kind of society Russia is striving to build and what kind of an economy it will have. The answers would help to resolve many problems and clarify the goals and perspectives of Russian higher education. ■

World Class Reform of Universities in Austria

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Austrian universities have been undergoing reform for over a decade. It started in the early 1990s with an Organization Act, which allowed universities to become more independent from state authority and to develop more efficient management structures. Since Austria has a public university system, this reform process was initiated by the Ministry of Education and Research.

During the 1990s, a whole range of reforms ensued, the most prominent of which created a more differentiated higher education market by permitting *Fachhochschulen* for the first time. This occurred in 1993, and the institutions have proliferated ever since. At the same time, the ministry launched an Evaluation Act prescribing mandatory evaluation for all courses at the university. Another example of reforms enacted by the

ministry formed the legal basis for establishing private universities through the creation of an accreditation board. Last but not least, in 2001 the ministry introduced tuition in Austria for the first time ever.

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The new piece of legislation encompasses all the major parts of higher education (academic programs, employment, and organizational structure) and is meant to address the problems of efficiency, effectiveness, flexibility, accountability and competition, and overregulation.

Austrian universities have long been characterized by high dropout rates and lengthy time-to-degree. The strong tradition of democratic governance structures, with many committees, has also resulted in a slow decision-making process. Universities are known for their lack of flexibility in institutional management. For example, shifting funds between categories has been impossible. Also, funds are budgeted on an annual basis—leading to what has been coined "December fever" (i.e., heavy year-end spending in departments and institutes).

Austrian universities have had internally based performance measurement systems and an underdeveloped sense of public accountability. They have been under almost no competitive pressure either for students or for faculty. At the same time, the universities are highly regulated institutions, with state laws and mandates stipulating almost everything—from salaries, employment, academic programs, and decision-making structures to exam and graduation procedures.

As the range of targeted problems indicates, the pressure for reform was felt by both institutional leaders and policymakers. Accordingly, the ministry prepared a