

High-stakes Entrance Examinations: A View from Brazil

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In Brazil, the growing dominance of the national exam for secondary education as a massive, unified entrance exam for higher education has several detrimental consequences. Besides effectively shaping the high school curriculum, with clear disadvantages for those who will not attend college, it restricts the diversity and regional characteristics of the higher education sector. Similar criticism applies to other countries that use national entrance exams. Some suggestions for possible changes are given.

Worldwide, millions of students and their families confront the stressful process of admission to higher education. Several countries employ national tests to determine who gets admitted, a system often presented as democratic and meritocratic, since all students take the same examinations. In Brazil, the national exam for secondary education (*Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio, ENEM*), is similar to the *Gaokao* (or College Entrance Examination) used in China, and similar high stakes entrance examinations in Turkey, Chile, Russia, and other countries. The current public debate about ENEM underscores its drawbacks, and parallels similar debates taking place elsewhere.

Brazilian higher education is characterized by a small, fairly well-financed network of selective federal (national) universities with free tuition, enrolling 1.1 million students, and a large private sector enrolling 5.4 million students. Additionally, 0.6 million students enroll at regional state universities, also tuition free. In contrast to many other Latin American countries, access to public universities in Brazil is limited; students have (historically) competed for admission on the basis of entrance examinations developed by each institution. Private institutions typically provide low-cost evening courses to people who have not been successful in gaining admission to public institutions. With the exception of a few elite private universities, admission to this sector is limited only by the student's ability to pay, and ENEM is not required.

THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF SECONDARY EDUCATION (ENEM)

ENEM was introduced in 1998 as a voluntary assessment

of secondary education, in order to measure the quality of school leavers. In 2010, the Ministry of Education and the federal universities agreed that the exam would become their main selection strategy for admission. The current version is a content-based assessment of Portuguese language, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, and writing, given annually over two days and administered simultaneously in different locations throughout the country. Students who pass the exam can apply to two federal institutions in any part of the country. The exam results are also used to select low-income students for fellowships and loans to study in private institutions; to determine eligibility for free secondary-level vocational courses; and to provide adults who meet specific minimum standards with secondary school completion certificates.

ENEM has been criticized for its high cost and vulnerability to corruption, well as for the quality and ideological biases of its questions, particularly in the social sciences. It costs about US\$100 million for the government, and most students with low income or coming from public schools are exempt from the US\$15 fee. In the past, the questions were leaked or stolen, and security measures need to be employed to limit the use of mobile devices to receive and/or share the correct answers to the questions. Additionally, there is growing concern about its potential to negatively impact secondary and higher education.

In 2015, 9.5 million current and past school graduates sat for the examination. Of these, 2.8 million competed for 205,000 places at federal institutions. The data show that students coming from highly educated families and good quality private or highly selective public institutions tend to get the most successful scores and thus skew the scores upward and make admission of local students more difficult.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF ENEM

The curriculum of secondary education in Brazil includes more than 15 mandatory subjects, with no optional courses and no flexibility or room for vocational study (available only after completing the traditional curriculum). ENEM reinforces this rigid standardization, turning all secondary schools, effectively, into preparation for the exam, even though most of the students who take the exam will never pursue higher education, and the majority of those who do will study in the private sector, where a qualifying exam is rarely required.

Although higher institutions vary enormously in size and quality from research-intensive public universities to small, private evening schools focused on the professions, all provide the same type of degrees in addition to teaching licenses. National legislation allows for short-term, vocational degrees, and some lead to better job opportunities than university degrees from low-quality institutions. How-

ever, the system lacks a path to postsecondary vocational careers, which currently account for less than 14 percent of the postsecondary enrollment. The transformation of ENEM into a different type of assessment could contribute to the differentiation of higher education.

ENEM has also weakened links between federal universities and their local communities. The intent of establishing these institutions throughout the country was to provide opportunities to the local populations, and contribute to regional development through extension work and applied research. ENEM was expected to make access to higher education more democratic, since it would allow students from anywhere to apply for a place at a federal university anywhere in the country. Lack of financial support for students with limited means to relocate for study has made this unachievable. Furthermore, the universal acceptance of a national exam has actually made the system even more elitist. Higher education institutions located in more remote regions have filled some degree programs with privileged students from wealthier regions who can afford to relocate, skewing the local applicant pool by pushing “cut-off” scores higher.

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CRITICISMS OF NATIONAL EXAMS IN CHINA, TURKEY, AND CHILE

Other countries are also questioning their unified national exams. In China, changing the *Gaokao* system is a component of the future higher education reform, which proposes to turn several hundred universities from academic to vocational institutions more closely associated with the requirements of the job market. The Chinese government’s 2010 “Blueprint for Medium and Long-Term National Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)” criticizes the system because: (1) “a single examination defines a student’s life/destiny”; (2) admissions and selection criteria are overly reliant on the College Entrance Examination score, not on comprehensive selection criteria; (3) there is only one set of examination questions for all of the different types and levels of higher education institutions; (4) the content and style of these examinations are not aligned with the purpose of *Suzhi* (more flexible and creative) education; (5) inequalities in admission opportunities exist across provinces; and

(6) higher education institutions lack autonomy in admissions procedures.”

Critics of the Turkish ÖSS (university entrance) exam express similar concerns and, additionally, condemn the reliance on cramming through private tutoring; the high social selectivity; and the effect of the exam on discouraging students from vocational paths.

In Chile, access to the country’s main public and private universities is also determined by a national test, the PSU (University Selection Test). Much of the criticism of the exam is related to the social discrimination it reinforces. A 2009 OECD review on the tertiary education in Chile noted, “PSU contributes significantly to the unequal distribution of tertiary places between socioeconomic groups. Pupils from municipal schools and poorer households are much less likely than pupils from private schools and richer households to pass the PSU. If they pass, they are less likely to achieve the higher scores that unlock student support and give access to the best universities.”

PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

In Brazil, the debate about ENEM is associated with the debates about the reform of secondary education. The proposal is to move from a unified to a diversified curriculum—a common core focused primarily on language and mathematics, followed by elective paths allowing either for more advanced academic studies, or for vocational choices for those who will enter the labor market directly upon graduation. Secondary schools must offer both general and professional education, and not a preparatory course oriented toward admission to a public university that only a few will attend. ENEM should test general verbal and mathematical competencies, and include separate evaluations for the different paths that different students will pursue, including certifications for technical careers. The outcomes of these assessments could be used by higher education institutions to select students, combined with other criteria appropriate to the institutions’ academic and regional missions and objectives.

Finally, it is also clear that the current practice of administering paper tests nationally, once each year, is insane. The exam should be offered at different times and in different locations, using modern technologies and devices used elsewhere around the globe. National assessments are not the cause of inequitable access to higher education, but there is no reason to maintain a system that further exacerbates these inequalities. ■