

Consequences of the EGE in Russia

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Abstract

The essence and consequences of the high-stakes Common State Examination (EGE) in Russia are analyzed. The system began as an anti-corruption effort, but then was changed to being a means to the commercialization of education. It has neither improved education, nor overcome corruption. The best way to resolve the problems is to privatize this examination to a non-governmental national testing center.

Keywords: governmental examination, test commercialization, unreliability, negative educational impact

At the end of 1999, at the very height of the transfer of Russia from socialism to capitalism, a group was created within the Center for Strategic Developments. This group, whose composition has never been revealed, proposed to the government of Russia to replace final examinations in secondary schools and entrance examinations at universities with one overall state (governmental) examination named the Common State Examination (Единый Государственный Экзамен), or in abbreviation the EGE (ЕГЭ). The first word *Единый* means one common, instead of two examinations - one at the end of secondary school, and a second at the entrance to universities. The second word *Государственный* may be translated as State in the sense of governmental because it is organized, conducted, and paid by the government of the Russian Federation via the Ministry of Science and Education. The third word *Экзамен* means examination in English.

According to Item 3 in Article 43.3 of the Russian Constitution, "Everyone has the right to receive, free of charge and on a competitive basis, higher education in a state or municipal educational institution or enterprise." However, in the project, only 5% of students who score above a certain point on the EGE were provided with a free higher education. All others had to pay. Specifically, five levels of payment were established, dependent on scores on the EGE. By this mechanism, the Russian government has tied the amount of tuition and fee for higher education to EGE scores. This scheme was named *Государственные Именные Финансовые Обязательства* (Governmental Personalized Financial Obligations or abbreviated as GIFO). The main idea is to introduce EGE and GIFO together as a means to determine payment for education. Consequently, the EGE-GIFO has brought about a new standard, which is not in Constitution; namely, the lower the EGE scores, the higher are the payments among those who are admitted into a university on competitive basis. Thus, the EGE was planned as a type of "high-stakes examination," the results of which would influence not only the fate of secondary school graduates and university entrants, but also would allow the government to require payments for almost 95% of the admitted students in higher education.

Problems arose from the moment the governmental decision was made to introduce this new unified examination as compulsory for all secondary school graduates and university entrants. The impetus for this examination can be traced to governmental attempts against corruption, which has noticeably become widespread in Russia until and after the change of the social system in 1991 (e.g., Avanesov, 1998). The main forms of corruption had been widespread bribery and nepotism.

The EGE was thus initiated as a reform movement but has by now gradually converted into being the cause of a chasm between political authorities and the citizenry; as well as a point of contention between supporters and opponents of the EGE. Numerous publications in the press have voiced support for and criticism against EGE, including sarcastic articles such as one entitled "the show must go on" have appeared. Additionally, ordinary citizens, civil

servants as well as renowned scientists have petitioned the President of the country to end EGE testing, which has been described by its opponents as a “government experiment.” From all these, it can be discerned that the EGE is no longer just a concern within the realm of education, but has become a general societal concern.

Official reasons for the development of the EGE

As a tool for social equality

The first official rationale for the introduction of the EGE was formulated in the spirit of the populist ideas of social justice and accessibility to quality education. At the parliamentary hearings on 14 November 2000, the former Minister of Education of Russia indicated the need for accessibility to higher education. He stated:

Today the children of the absolute majority of the population, the children of intelligentsia, teachers, from the distant village, from the Siberian village and the Far East, cannot enter universities. The families do not have money to buy tickets. In earlier years in Moscow universities, 25 percent of the students were Muscovites, and 75% of others; now on the contrary, 26% of them are out-of-city students and 74% are Muscovites. Our universities are created not only for Moscow and the Moscow region, but for the entire country.

The same words he repeated in numerous interviews (Company for the Development of Public Relations, 2003).

For this very reason, according to the official government position, the system of EGE was introduced. Instead of the two existing system of examinations, a secondary school graduate exam and a college entrance exam, one unified national exam was to be used for both purposes. The goal of ensuring equal opportunities for higher education was reiterated by the Board of Ministry in 2004 (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2004).

As an anti-corruption tool

In a radio address on December 18, 2003, President Vladimir Putin reported that the EGE was conducted in order to simplify the procedure for university admissions. He also mentioned that a second aim of the EGE was to reduce

the level of corruption in the educational sphere. Struggle against corruption was and is acutely necessary for Russia.

Although it is true that college entrance testing is often considered a means to combat corruption or nepotism in many countries (e.g., see the article by Liu & Wu about China in this special issue), the former Russian Ministry of Education, which was charged with the implementation of the EGE system, actually refused to use it to prevent corruption. When asked about the anti-corruption function of the EGE, the Minister of Education responded that the aim of the EGE was “completely not for that... I can officially say that combating corruption is generally the work of other departments, not that of the Ministry of Education.” He further stated that it would have been impossible to combat corruption in education because the field of education is occupied by intelligent people who can devise clever ways to make corruption look legitimate. As an example, he described the story of the university rector who, instead of blatantly asking for a bribe of 5,000 dollars from his friend to guarantee the admission of the friend’s daughter to the university, the rector stated to his friend, “Let’s bet 5,000 dollars that your daughter will be admitted on her own right without bribery” (Company for the Development of Public Relations, 2003).

Multiple functions

Aside from the more lofty political goals of social equality and anti-corruption, the EGE has a number of operational functional goals. Bakker (2005) identified at least four such functions: 1) as the final examination for high schools; 2) as the entrance examination to universities; 3) for the awarding of grants for university education (i.e., GIFO); and 4) as a general measure of educational achievements in the Russian Federation. The third function of awarding grants for university education is due to the GIFO portion of the EGE/GIFO pair. Specifically, GIFOs are state nominal financial obligations. This system assumed an objective distribution of the means for higher education. The categories of GIFO to which a student belongs will depend on his/her EGE score. The highest scores will ensure a free university education. But for those who score lower, the higher will be the payment. The EGE score was planned to be the basis for the allocation of funds for higher education.

Immediate consequences of the EGE-GIFO link

The linking of EGE scores to the GIFO system of tuition payment almost immediately led to some observable economic and political consequences.

Economic consequences

It should be noted here that the function of the EGE as a basis for awarding grants, as was identified by Bakker (2005), is true only under a system that no one is entitled to a free higher education and therefore must compete for financial grant awards through the EGE/GIFO system. However, given the Russian constitutional guarantee of a free higher education for its citizens, essentially, the federal government has removed itself through the EGE/GIFO system from the financial responsibilities for higher education for the bulk of young people. That is, the effect of the system is directly contrary to both the letters and the intents of the Russian Constitution.

Indirectly, the EGE/GIFO has become a first step toward the privatization of higher education. In July 2000, the federal government issued Document № 1072 in which the status of universities changed from that of "State Educational Establishments" to a new status of "Educational Organizations" (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2000).

This opened the way to the rapid privatization of universities. This was implemented in spite of objections from the Russian State Duma and from the Congress of Rectors of Russian Universities.

Ironically, and unexpectedly, instead of minimizing its financial responsibilities for higher education, the EGE/GIFO has actually led to a heavier financial burden for the government. First, as a result of the EGE/GIFO system, universities are given a new right to set their own tuition. Thus, elite universities would establish higher tuitions while others would set lower prices. Second, since universities were interested in obtaining high sums of GIFO funds from the government on the basis of EGE scores, these scores have begun artificially and irrepressibly risen both under the pressure of corruption and financial self interests. As a result of both over-charged tuition and inflated EGE scores, the Government of Russia was forced to pay more than was originally intended. While the cost for higher education has risen due to the use of the EGE, some of the smaller local universities will become economically unviable and will be closed.

Political consequences

Although universities have gained their abilities to set their own tuitions, they have lost their right to determine their own entrance examinations and criteria. The EGE has thus undermined the autonomy of universities established by law. Matters such as educational standards, certification and accreditation of educational establishments are supposed to be within the purview of educational institutions only. Through the EGE, the federal government has imposed their will on the educational establishments of the country. Yet, entrance in universities is a complex scientific problem of educational selection on the basis of the ability of an applicant in mastering the contents of the

specific educational program. It cannot be solved by a simple and sweeping EGE/GIFO. Rather, it requires the creation of independent regional and intra-universities testing centers and by the development of sound systems of personnel selection. Yet, educational institutions have lost their abilities to make such determinations.

Impact on corruption

Ironically, even though one of the official goals of the EGE-GIFO system is to fight against corruption, as a result of the financial elements of the GIFO portion of the system, corruption has increased instead. The corruption has been further exacerbated by the lack of transparency on the part of the Government of the Russian Federation around the results of the system. Reports of illegal manipulations of EGE test results are widespread.

Kuz'minov, Rector of the College of Economics in Moscow, estimates that about 10% of EGE scores today are the results of corruption (Lemoutkina, 2005).

The EGE has led to a new turn of corruption surrounding the testing and funding system. Because of the absence of genuine public control and accountability, corruption has reduced Russian education to that of a second-class status. In 2005, the level of corruption in Russia has placed it from the 90th place in the previous year to the 126th places in terms of clean government, making Russia on par with such developing nations as Niger and Sierra Leone (The United Nations, 2004).

Impact on education

It is difficult to evaluate the success of the EGE as only limited data are available. Judging from the limited statistics, the implementation of the EGE is going well. The extent of implementation is confirmed by official statements and publications. According to the Russian Ministry of Education and Science, in 2005, 850,000 high school graduates from 78 regions took the EGE, which were 30,000 more than it had been in 2004. The implementation will expand to two additional regions in 2006, making the total number of examinees around 1 million (Lemoutkina, 2005).

At present more than 78 regions of the Russian Federation presented the "matched solutions" from the participation in the experiment in 2006-2008. Also, the number of regions participating in all subject areas has steadily increased, from 4 in 2003, to 8 in 2004 to 14 in 2005. In 2003, 19 regions participated in 6-11 subjects. This increased to 35 regions in 2004 and to 51 regions in 2005. (Bolotov, 2004). There is clearly a steady increase in the number of regions participating in the EGE. However, this increase can be at least parti-

ally attributed to the financial incentive for participation. Funds for the administration of the EGE are allocated in such a way that participating regional authorities are provided with half of the funds.

Consequences on the quality of education

These quantitative increases beg the question as to whether there has been an improvement in the quality of education. Due to the lack of program transparency, information is difficult to obtain. Available data are often untrustworthy. For example, according to a report by the Liberty radio station, at one of the territories of Russia in 2005, the EGE scores improved a miraculous 2,800 per cent (Kostinsky, 2005).

In the absence of reliable statistics, the general public opinion is that the quality of Russian education has deteriorated. From 5 to 10% of school-age children are not attending schools today. Those who attend schools are reading less. School compositions are largely replaced by rote learning of model writings. The Minister of Science and Education, Fursenko(2005) publicly admitted the worsening of the quality of education in Russia. However, he blamed the problem on the low wages of teachers, reduction in interests in learning, and also the absence among students of "a clear understanding of how the quality of knowledge and education can actually change their lives." Test coaching classes and private paid test coaches have begun to appear everywhere. These coaching classes focus on only test-taking skills without helping students to advance their knowledge.

The declared aims - an increase in accessibility and quality of education - are not achieved by means of the EGE. Results of independent research indicate that the effect of the EGE-GIFO voucher experiment increases inequality in access to higher education, and that it is difficult to see any improvements of efficiency. Russia is characterized by a large inequity between rural and urban areas. Market governance through vouchers introduced in such context seems doomed to increase inequality (Kleshchukova, 2005).

The other aim of combating corruption has also failed. Instead, corruption has grown. The payment for education reached an unprecedented level. Now, 57% of college students must pay for their education. Although the official goals for the EGE are for various reforms, the evidence suggests that the true aim is the commercialization of education in Russia, in spite of the fact that the income of the general population is low and can ill-afford privatized education and the general public is against such an educational policy.

The Rector of Moscow State University, Sadovnichiy (2001) stated, "As I have repeatedly said, the gap between higher education and general education in secondary schools has reached a catastrophic level. Many specialists have projected that this gap will lead to the lowering of university standards to the levels of secondary schools." This gap in knowledge between secondary school

graduates and college entrance requirements has further hampered the possibility of establishing an EGE appropriate for college entrance.

Consequences on the equality of educational opportunities

As a democratically oriented country, Russia has the obligations to ensure equal opportunities and not to erect barriers for its citizens to obtain education. The EGE is essentially a government-sponsored barrier to limit educational opportunities to its citizens.

With the EGE, the cutoff score for a given university can be easily manipulated by the university to maximize the financial responsibilities of students. This unavoidably reduces the number of citizens who can attend a university. Hence, contrary to its goal of increasing educational opportunities, the EGE-GIFO system has deprived individuals from low-income backgrounds the opportunity for higher education. This has polarized education into those for the elite and those for the mass (Avanesov, 2000) Mass education begins to degrade and universities have been turned into diploma mills.

To illustrate, the Republic of Saha (Yakutiya) was among the first to participate in the EGE social experiment. As a result, in 2003, only 25% of the freshmen in their universities were able to enroll without payment. The remaining 75% were obliged to pay due to their EGE-GIFO results. It is clear that, instead of ensuring the equality and accessibility of higher education to Russians, the system has limited the opportunities to only those who can pay. And this is in spite of the insistence by President Putin that the basis of the national policy is free education.

Fjodorov, the Rector of Moscow Technical University, stated that "EGE-GIFO enlarges the paid component in education and thus, decreases accessibility. The EGE-GIFO will not work anywhere in the world. Where it has been tried, the citizens have rejected it" (Fjodorov, 2000).

Summary and discussion

Many independent authors, including many prominent scientists, consider the EGE a powerful destructive force on Russian education, which had until recently, enjoyed a high status in the world. Some officials have compared the destructive force of the EGE to that of the momentum of an automobile, which is difficult to stop suddenly. Perturbed by negative consequences of the EGE, the scientific community recently submitted an open letter to President Putin to voice their protest against the system. The letter pointed out the destructive nature of the system to Russian society and called for an end to the EGE.

They listed seven major reasons for the termination of the testing system.

Among these reasons against the EGE-GIFO system, the scientists identified the privatization of education and the conversion of Russian schools to test coaching institutions as two major sources of concern. Additionally, the lack of transparency of the system makes mass manipulations and falsifications of results inevitable. Also, the EGE not only cannot fight against corruption, but will redistribute and multiply it under new forms. The letter went on to suggest several steps to be taken to improve the quality of education. The first step is to make the results of the EGE-GIFO social experiment open and transparent.

The question now is what can be done. First, it is necessary to fight against corruption in any national effort, including the EGE. Corruption can be minimized if the EGE-GIFO project were managed by professionals. Additionally, as Bakker suggested, an increase in the transparency in the management of the EGE and the removal of vagueness of responsibilities and procedures will help (Bakker, 2004).

It is necessary to put an end to the strategy of the commercialization of education, as a result of which Russia has descended to the 57th place on the index of the development human potentials (UN Report, 2004). Russia has been deprived of public education. The commercialization through the EGE system has polarized education and the education for the mass has deteriorated.

It is also necessary to create a structure for the civilian oversight and control of education in general. Educational reforms without the willing cooperation among students, parents, citizens, society in general and the government are impossible. It is necessary to understand that education is first of all the affair of students, their parents, relatives, teachers and professors. Therefore, effective educational reform does not come from a governmental imposition of standards and tests, but from ensuring the quality of teachers, the adequacy of school facilities, from adequate nutrition for the children, adequate supplies and textbooks, from the commitment to the future of the children. Finally, it is necessary to conduct formal studies of any damages that might have been brought on by the EGE to students.

The best way to overcome the deficiencies of EGE is to redesign it from scratch. Foremost, the goals of the system must be clearly articulated and sufficient commitment must be made to realize these goals. No test can serve as many purposes as the current EGE has set out to serve. As it is and given the consequences, the EGE is not a good university admission test (Bakker, 2004). If the goal is indeed to have a tool to fight against corruption in education or a tool to ensure educational equity, the new appropriate tests must be designed with these exact goals in mind without overburdening them with other objectives, such as the commercialization of education. If the goal is to have a tool to aid college admission decisions, another approach run by another organization other than those of the current EGE is needed.

Human history is filled with the development of erroneous solutions to

problems that have led to unintended new problems. Many of these unintended new problems took decades to overcome. It is reasonable to assume that the role of high-stakes examinations will continue to grow. In Russia, the growth should be accompanied by careful scrutiny of unintended consequences of these assessment systems. Inappropriate assessment methods and systems can potentially lead to long-term damages to younger generation that will take years or decades to correct.

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