

From national to global: the role of national assessment system in reforming education system
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Introduction

Azerbaijan has set its national educational goals in line with needs of the developing society and global trends. Activities aimed at reaching these goals cover various aspects of the education process from assessment standards to classroom practices. While in the earlier years of independence the government took steps mostly aimed at strengthening national identity, now it is more concerned with improvement of quality of education through introduction of internationally accepted standards and practices and integration with global educational community. The national educational goals of Azerbaijan can be set forth in general topics as follows:

- Strengthening national identity and supporting Russian speaking population in adapting to new conditions;
- Improvement of quality of secondary education in line with modern practices;
- Improvement of quality of higher education to meet needs of labour market;
- Application of skill-based education methods throughout the education process;
- Integration with international educational community;
- Wide application of ICT in education and educational administration.

The government found it purposeful to establish the State Students Admission Commission – the agency functioning independently from Ministry of Education and performing external quality assurance function in order to facilitate achievement of set targets and combating rooted problems. As one of main actors in education sector, the SSAC currently contributes to implementation of reforms aimed at reaching national educational goals. Specifically, besides its main function of selection of students for higher education institutions, the SSAC performs such quality assuring and quality improving functions like (a) *reflecting shortcomings and progresses in education sector and their underlying causes* and (b) *'projecting' new standards into education sector*. Two centralized examinations – University Entrance Test (UET) and Master Degree Programs Access Test (MPAT) – administered by the SSAC are used to stimulate reformation of school curricula and introduction of new teaching methods in various stages of education. Moreover, application of scientifically grounded standards (for example, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced cutscores) enables to maintain the quality of student contingent in proper level. Some changes in content and format of examinations like introduction of mandatory Azerbaijani Language test for students of Russian sector, introduction of Math test in selection of students for all university programs, introduction of General test in MPAT, as well as application of Foreign Language test in UET and MPAT have their positive reflections in overall education process and characteristics of student contingent.

But the process of development and reformation is not always as smooth as it is desirable. The problems inherited from Soviet system like corruption and so called 'human relations' constitute a serious obstacle in the way of development and must be taken into consideration during planning of educational reforms. Thanks to the high security standards applied by the SSAC in administration of centralized examinations the influence of above-mentioned negative factors has been eliminated from students admission process, which in its turn raises efficiency of measures aimed at stimulation of positive changes in education system through changes in content and format of examinations.

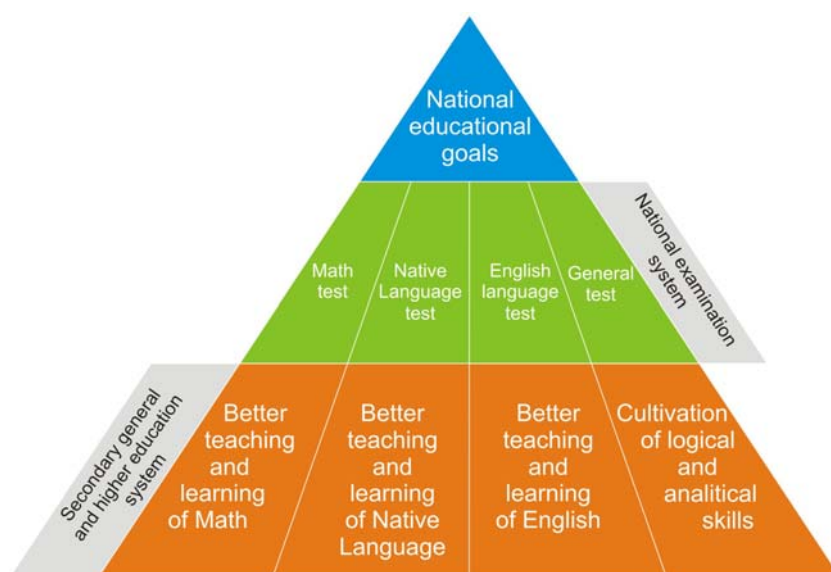
Innovations in centralized entrance examinations and their outcomes

As the SSAC is the only competent agency in making decisions for admission of students to undergraduate and graduate programs of universities and enjoys high popularity and confidence of population, its decisions have a positive impact on the education system. In the process of making decisions and restructuring content of examinations which have their reflections in various stages of education the SSAC recognize the importance of national educational goals. During last years the State Commission made the following steps to facilitate development of national education system:

- Introduction of Native Language and Mathematics tests as an obligatory part of UET;
- Introduction of Foreign Language test in UET and MPAT;
- Introduction of obligatory General test in MPAT.

All these steps combined with scientifically developed and applied standards have a positive impact on curricula and teaching and learning processes at all stages of education system as well as change characteristics and improve the quality of student contingent and future workforce.

Picture 1. Impact of national examinations in education sector



University Entrance Test

At present the SSAC administers four types of University Entrance Tests (UET) depending on selected by applicant university program. University programs are grouped as *Science and Engineering (SE)*, *Economy and Management (EM)*, *Humanities (HU)* and *Medicine and Biology (MB)*. Test for each of the groups includes specific combination of subjects.

As the country, especially in rural regions, suffers from lack of proficient teachers capable of cultivating the whole range of cognitive skills, memorization is widely applied teaching and learning method in Native Language, Literature and History. Specific types of items applied in UET demanding skills like generalization, interpretation, suggestion and prediction exclude the possibility of getting high scores based solely on memorization. The SSAC has also introduced Mathematics as mandatory subject for all specialty groups to stimulate development of mathematical thinking and problem solving skills in students. We believe it was the important reason that explains relatively good performance of Azerbaijani students in Mathematics in PISA test.

At present applicants to all university programs have to pass Native Language and Mathematics test. Weighting coefficients of these subjects differ depending on the importance of them for different programs (Table 1).

At this point one important aspect of Azerbaijani education system must be noted. This aspect is that Azerbaijan's education system is bilingual and includes two – Azerbaijani and Russian sectors. That's why the entrance examinations are held in two languages but with similar content. The difference is that applicants of Russian sector pass Russian language test as a native language. In order to ensure requirements of the Law of the Azerbaijan Republic on State Language not violating rights of students of Russian sector, the SSAC addressed the problem by introducing preliminary moderate Azerbaijani language test for applicants of Russian sector. This is also the measure taken as a part of activities aimed at strengthening national identity.

Table 1. Structure of UET and weighting coefficients of subjects

Subjects Included in test	Specialty groups				
	Science & Engineering	Economy & Management	Humanities		Medicine & Biology
			Native language & History	Foreign languages & International studies	
Native language	1	1	2	2	1
Literature			1	1	
Maths	2	2	1	1	1
Physics	2				1
Chemistry	1				2
Biology					2
History			2	1	
History of Azerbaijan		1			
Geography		2			
Foreign language	1	1	1	2	

Foreign Language test has been included in examinations for three of four specialty groups. The decision has been made to facilitate student exchange with leading universities of the world. As the Azerbaijan universities still have to raise the quality of education to achieve the standards of leading European universities, and the government sets priority to train highly qualified specialists in various sectors of the economy, presently student exchange will be the best way to address the problem. Proficiency in foreign languages, especially in European languages is crucial for sending students to leading universities of the world, inviting professors from abroad for lectures and introducing international programs in Azerbaijani universities.

Master Degree Programs Access Test (MPAT) as quality assurance mechanism in HEI

Selection and monitoring

According to Michhaela Marti and Antony Stella, three co-ordinating types of power in higher education – the academic oligarchy, the state and the market – cover the following quality assuring functions in higher education:

- Direct monitoring of the quality of institutions and programmes by the state;
- Provision of incentives to professional organizations for their self-reliance;
- Reliance on market mechanisms for the improvement of academic quality (2007: 28).

In case of Azerbaijan, as the education market has not yet taken its final shape and the system of traditional 'human relations' is a serious obstacle for internal quality assurance of institutions, the state still assumes more active role in the process.

Two private universities – "Khazar" and "Caucasus" - which can be regarded as pioneers in higher education market as well as the Academy of Public Management under the President of the

Azerbaijan Republic, which enjoys serious state support and effective internal quality assurance mechanisms are exceptions.

Consequently, effective external quality assurance measures have a serious impact on the quality of education. In 2005 by decree of the President of the Azerbaijan Republic the SSAC launched new type of centralized examination – Master Degree Programs Access Test (MPAT) – aimed at ensuring public supervision over selection of students for Master degree programs. The test caused dissatisfaction of some university authorities. This dissatisfaction is not caused by the introduction of MPAT only. In general, the system of public supervision over admission process makes universities lose their influence. For this reason they feel disappointment with any restriction of their authority caused by innovations in external quality assurance.

Nevertheless, the new type of centralized examination plays an important role in admission process. The MPAT is the ambitious initiative of Government aimed at external quality assurance of higher education. Although the primary function of MPAT is selection of students for Master degree programs, the test also provides information about quality of undergraduate education, important for planning of future reforms and making proper administrative decisions. For example, the statistics derived from first campaign cast doubts on validity of internal assessment at the undergraduate level. As a result, starting from the second campaign all undergraduates regardless of their GPA were permitted to participate in MPAT.

MPAT includes General and Foreign Language test along with test measuring specialty related skills and knowledge. Master programs representing similar areas have been grouped under one test. It is obvious that the initiative significantly accelerated the process of modernizing university education in line with Bologna principles.

In general, the MPAT has the following functions:

- Fair selection of students for Master degree education;
- Keeping students motivated during undergraduate education;
- Monitoring of validity of internal assessment during undergraduate education;
- Stimulation of introduction of skill-based teaching and learning methods in education system;
- Stimulation of improvement of Foreign Language training in all stages of education

Foreign Language (English) test

Azerbaijani Government recognizes the importance of improvement of its workforce for successful integration in the world economy. New economic and social developments stimulated rising dynamism and aspirations of young population of the country and created high expectations for the future prosperity. But to make these developments sustainable and translate dreams into reality the dynamism of young population must be supported with quality education. As it is very difficult to raise the quality of education to the level of developed countries relying on our own resources, it is desirable to benefit from relations with countries better developed educational institutions. Inclusion of mandatory Foreign Language test in MPAT in addition to the UET serves this goal. Advanced Foreign Language (especially English) knowledge and skills provide the following opportunities for Azerbaijani students:

- Access to wide range of international scientific resources;
- Facilitation of global mobility of Azerbaijani students;
- Raising efficiency of international academic programs in Azerbaijan;
- Development of new generation of academic staff

It is well known that many countries used this experience in the period after Second World War. As noted by N.V.Varghese “Human resources development and investment in higher education became an essential part of the development strategy during this period (post-war). ... In

fact, many of the universities of the developing world depended on study-abroad programmes to develop their first generation academic staff in the universities”.

Important initiative of the government addresses the goal of development of human potential. In 2006 by decree of the President of the Azerbaijan Republic I. Aliyev a scholarship for Azerbaijani students to study abroad was established. In accordance with the program goals, hundreds of Azerbaijani students will have opportunity to study in the best foreign universities. The program will contribute to the improvement of the economy of Azerbaijan and sustainable development of the country.

General test

General test as a part of MPAT is a specific issue to be discussed. Inclusion of General test in MPAT revealed one of most serious problems of Azerbaijani education system. Low scores gained from General test by undergraduates revealed that higher education system in Azerbaijan is mostly based on transfer of knowledge and doesn't encourage development of skills and cognitive abilities important in real life and further scientific research. Therefore, graduates of Azerbaijani universities in most cases are not able to apply knowledge in real conditions.

The SSAC initiative to include General test raised some protests within academic community. Some conservative academicians protested against prevalence of General test in examination for Master degree programs claiming that it would damage authority of some university departments and diminish interest of students for specialty related subjects not included in the MPAT. However, we consider this argument as groundless, because there are internal examinations within each program, which are intended to stimulate students to master all subjects. Nevertheless, inclusion of General test in MPAT as well as in Civil Service Pre-selection Test (CSPT) aimed at selecting candidates for employment in public agencies caused new wave of tutoring in the country. At present, private tutoring companies training students for General test enjoy high popularity among university students. At the same time some universities realize the importance of the problem and take measures to change education process from information-based one to skill-based one. Moreover, the Ministry of Education responded to the problem and introduced elements of logic into the curricula of primary and secondary schools.

Main obstacles to overcome

As it was mentioned above that there are serious obstacles in the way of reformation and development of education system. So called 'human relations' and corruption are the main factors negatively influencing education sector and impeding the progress. And this is the reason of strictly centralized administration of entrance examinations under rigid security conditions by the SSAC.

The education system of Azerbaijan during a long time has been a part former Soviet system, which in its turn has been based on human interrelations and implicit values. In this system success of student was determined not mostly by his/her aptitude, but rather by other factors such as teacher-student and/or parent-teacher relations, ideological views, social position of parents etc. This system of 'human relations' penetrated into all phases of the education process had dominating influence on decision-making process. Application of centralized examination system based on clear-cut norms and standards, which minimizes the role of human factor in decision-making has been proven an effective way to change mentality of main actors in education sector like school administrators, teachers and parents.

Replacement of flexible implicit values with strict written norms, wide application of modern technologies and minimization of role of human factor in decision-making process with regard to admission of students to higher education institutions damaged the old system of 'human relations'. The new conditions changed the status of secondary schools and universities from decision-makers to providers of knowledge. The new system shortly gained support of government

and majority of population. However, it make take some time until many teachers, academicians and parents that previously supported the old system of 'human relations' stop to blame centralized examination system for their misfortunes and start to adapt to the realities of new time.

Conclusion

At present Azerbaijan implements economical, social and cultural reforms to catch up with the rapid pace of globalization. The importance of Azerbaijan for the world increases with its involvement in global energy and communication projects. Continuous development of the economy and rapid changes in the society make necessary preparation of highly qualified specialists in all sectors of the economy, which in its turn underscores importance of development and modernization of education system and to learn from experience of developed countries.

The President of the Azerbaijan Republic I.Aliyev underlining the education and intellectual potential as important factors for continuous development of the society set the improvement of quality of trainings of specialists as a priority of state policy. The philosophy of the process has been formulated by the President in his speech in World Summit on Information Society held in Geneva where he stated, "We will convert black gold into human gold". The idea of the speech was investing benefits from oil export into development of human potential. Later the President signed decrees and orders supporting this idea and the government launched initiatives aimed at improvement of quality of education. The SSAC's place in this process is critical in terms of success of educational reforms. If on the one hand it performs an important role of eradicating corruption from students admission process and minimizing influence of 'human relations' on education process, on the other hand it launches projects aimed at improvement of education and integration with international educational society.

Although the national assessment system in Azerbaijan has proven itself instrumental in combating corruption in university entrance system and acts as an important tool for assuring and controlling quality and stimulating educational reforms, nevertheless, the education process mostly takes place in the classroom and real improvement of education starts with the improvement of teaching and learning process. Activities of the SSAC have a strong positive impact on quality of student contingent, but have less tangible effect on the quality of training provided in secondary general schools. The success of applicants in entrance examination in many cases is the result of personal efforts of students and use of services of private tutors. The reason is that with the exclusion of influence of traditional 'human relations' from university entrance process and due to the high competition for admission to especially popular university programs students and parents sometimes simply ignore the schools which neither provide quality education, nor have influence in decision-making. This is another problem of Azerbaijan education system to be addressed in urgent way. The Ministry of Education takes some steps aimed at improvement of quality of secondary education and classroom practices which are not the subject of discussion in this article. The SSAC, however, annually holds comprehensive research and maintains database reflecting educational indicators of all districts and schools. The database and the results of research published at the end of every year are valuable tools for policy-makers and educational administrators to reveal problems of schools and address them in proper way.

Although some similar features can be found in development of all countries in the world, there are also many unique conditions within each country which demand specific approach. Azerbaijan takes example of European countries as a model for development of its education sector, but it also possesses many specific historical and cultural features as well as geo-political and socio-economical conditions. In such situation realistically determined national educational goals and well-planned activities towards their achievement accompanied with sound quality assurance mechanisms is the best way leading to success. We believe that willingness and determination of

governmental agencies and raising dynamism of population will enable us to “convert black gold into human gold”.

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