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The Key Drivers of the Unified National Test in Kazakhstan: A Critical Analysis of its Impact on School Leavers

ZHANNA JUMABAYEVA

This study is aimed to identify the key drivers of the Unified National Test in Kazakhstan and to determine its impact on school leavers. The main key drivers of implementing the new assessment policy include the following: saving students' time, receiving school certificate and combating corruption. The paper also considers whether the Unified National Test is a successful assessment policy. This investigation indicates that there are both advantages and disadvantages in implementing the Unified National Test. For example, with the introduction of new system of assessment, there have been many changes in students' lives. However, some of these changes are considered as hopeless as they caused social problems like *suicide*. There were also different issues appeared since the introduction of the Unified National Test including private tutoring, the importance of core subjects, which led to a narrowing of a school curriculum, the hidden curriculum titled *Course preparation for the Unified National Test* and quality gap in education among various population groups. The results of this study show that the structure in the Unified National Test is overall good, but it can be improved for the better.

Keywords: assessment policy; Kazakhstan; school leaver; secondary education; Unified National Test

Introduction

In Kazakhstan since 2004, the Unified National Test (UNT) has been taken by all students at the end of Grade 11, and includes five subjects: Kazakh, Russian, mathematics, History of Kazakhstan and one optional subject (Lee, 2013, para. 1). There were many gaps between the policy and practice of the integrated curriculum, because a new subject appeared called *Course preparation for the UNT*, although this was not formally introduced into the curriculum. This broad impact, as well as my own personal experience with the test, have motivated me to study and analyze this curriculum reform policy for students in the last year of secondary school.

When the UNT was first introduced in my secondary school, teachers and the school learned and worked hard to fulfill the rationales of the policy shift. Teachers spent their time doing course preparation activities for the UNT. Nevertheless, there were some impediments to the implementation of the new policy. Teachers in my school thought that oral examinations were more feasible and practical than written tests. However, for some students passing oral examinations is considered the worst thing in comparison with written ones, where a student can be worried about what he or she needs to respond to the people who take exams.

Nonetheless, in my school, having previously been used to covering all subjects, teachers had to adjust their teaching so that they only delivered core subjects such as Kazakh, Russian, math and Kazakhstan history since the introduction of the UNT. The question I will address in this paper is whether the UNT is a successful assessment policy. If not, what are the factors contributing to its lack of success? Therefore, in this article I plan to critically analyze the national assessment policy. I also discover the key drivers for this policy and analyze its impact on school leavers in Kazakhstan.

The first section introduces the details of the UNT, based on news and governmental reports, as well as my own experience with the test. In the second section, I illustrate the key drivers for the UNT, which aimed to standardize and combat corruption in school certification and university entry. In the third section, I examine the assessment policy and its impact on school leavers, highlighting the growth of private tutoring services, the increase in student suicide, and the narrowing of school curriculum. Finally, I conclude that while the aims and structure of the test are acceptable, several important challenges remain to be addressed.

The Unified National Test

In Kazakhstan, oral examinations at the end of schooling have historically been a popular method for assessment. However, in the last 10 years the majority of assessment has been in the form of written tests. Our parents and relatives, for instance, studied in a traditional way, which included oral examinations at the end of grade 10. Interestingly, the system of education in Soviet times comprised 10 years of studies instead of 11, while nowadays' education system in Kazakhstan is already transforming into a 12-year system. Thus, since 1991 after gaining independence there has been significant progress made in higher education reform in Kazakhstan such as the 12-year system of education, the implementation of the UNT, and the use of technology. For this discussion, I will focus on one reform made in the system of education, much discussed in the literature, which is the UNT.

The UNT, introduced in 2004 by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan (MoES), is a "form of a unified, combined examination for completing secondary education and entering

university” (OECD, 2007, p. 42). It is sometimes called the *Comprehensive Test* (OECD, 2007). It takes place practically simultaneously across the entire country and is extremely important for students. Medelbek (2014) said that all who want to receive higher education “pray to the letters U-N-T” (para. 2).

The time when the UNT was first implemented, the test included 30 for each of four subjects (math, native language, history of Kazakhstan, and a subject by choice), and the pass score was 40 out of 120. However, since 2008, certain changes have been made to the system for administering the UNT. The national assessment now consists of five subjects: math, history, Russian language, Kazakh language, and a subject of choice, for instance, English, French, German, Physics, World History, Chemistry, Geography or Biology (Lee, 2013, para. 1). The overall pass score rose to 50, and each subject now includes 25 questions and the time given is three and a half hours instead of three hours provided previously (Gulyayeva, 2016, para. 7).

MoES is the official authority for setting educational policy. It has realized the importance of the UNT and has made significant attempts to implement it. According to the OECD (2007), “[The] UNT is used as the tool for assessing the quality of students’ knowledge in Kazakhstan” (p. 43). Students who get high score in the UNT receive public grants (Tasbulatova, 2010, p. 4). I experienced the UNT for myself in 2006 after two years of its implementation in Kazakhstan. My score was 107 out of 120. That was very difficult and stressful for me, because my task was not only to get as high a score as possible, but also to gain “Altyn belgi” (Golden medal). Unfortunately, I was not given the medal because I did not get the necessary score in history, which must be 25 for the grade *excellent* while I achieved a mere 24! My experience raises concerns about the compulsory subjects that students have to pass in order to get the highest scores in the UNT. Although the new test offers students a choice for one subject, most of the subjects are mandatory. More importantly, the focus of the questions in the UNT is based on certain dates rather than on the depth and range of knowledge, especially in history, which may have a limiting effect on school knowledge.

To sum up, the UNT is the examination in five subjects to gain school certificate and enter HE institutions. Despite its changes to include more subjects and to offer additional time to the students, it still remains a controversial topic due to the stress it places on students and the effects it may have on curriculum and instruction in schools. Based on this knowledge, in the next section I am going to look at the key drivers of the UNT to find out about the main aims of the UNT’s implementation.

Key Drivers of the Unified National Test

From the introduction above, it can be seen that the UNT has a great impact on students’ final year at school and their future. Therefore, in this section I will answer the key question: “What are the key drivers for the UNT?” This section is an important set of discussions for anyone seeking to understand the aims of introducing the UNT assessment policy.

For the most part, people criticize the content and quality of testing questions. They believe that the multiple-choice questions do not really show any skills of graduating students. For example, according to the OECD (2007),

Multiple-choice questions are not able to assess the ability of pupils to develop a logical argument, to write coherently or to be creative, all of which are important skills both for university study and for the labour market. Also, pupils can be trained in techniques for answering multiple-choice questions, which can therefore hide whether pupils really understand the content of the subject. This is unhelpful for university entry, for the labour market and for secondary schools. (p. 45)

This means that testing does not show all the knowledge the students might get during their studies. Some of them are even unable to gain the minimum score necessary for entering university.

Drawing on my reading, there are different key drivers of implementing the UNT: saving student response time, receiving school certificate and combating corruption. The UNT was designed to be “an attempt to implement a corruption-free, transparent admission procedure” (OECD, 2007, p. 61). Thus, one of the aims of transition to test examination lay in the fact that it could resolve the corruption issue in higher education.

At this point, the definition of corruption is necessary to offer, as it is a crucial problem in the education sector today. As stated by Transparency International (2016), corruption is “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (para. 1). Corruption existed in the Soviet Union; however, it has increased since then (Heyneman, Anderson & Nuraliyeva, 2008, p. 21). The greatest amount of corruption in education has been especially seen at university level. Therefore, MoES has developed and implemented the UNT to struggle with corruption and make the university admissions process more transparent. This is important because everyone will now have an

opportunity to enter university. It is not necessary to be rich in order to get higher education, because the chances of entering university became more achievable with the help of a standardized test. It is important to note that higher education was not available to everyone before when there was no such examination.

Testing also saves time for both students and teachers. It takes only three and a half hours to pass the UNT, while five oral examinations, of which passed in different day, could take many more hours, even days and weeks. Thus, testing will not be a long path for students as there are five exams passed in one day.

Apart from combating corruption and saving students' time, the UNT also "serves as a school-leaving certificate" (OECD, 2007, p. 201). It allows school leavers receive the appropriate school-leaving certificate for going to a university. In other words, the test serves as a "transition test" from secondary school to university (Lee, 2013, para. 1). Students then get a certificate from the school when they pass successfully the UNT.

To sum up, the main key drivers of implementing the new assessment policy are saving the students' time, receiving school certificate and combating corruption. Each of these points is important to my discussion below, as they each lead to important impacts on the students themselves.

Impact of the UNT on School Leavers

In this section, I will answer the key question: "What is the impact of the UNT on school leavers?" The following discussions are important to our ability to understand the effect of the UNT on students. I will consider how different issues arose because of the adoption of UNT, which is taking an increasingly important place in our lives. These issues include the growth of private tutoring, the quality gap in education of various population groups, the relationship between test-takers and suicide, the implementation of a hidden curriculum, and the emphasized importance of core subjects (Kazakh, Russian, math, and history of Kazakhstan).

To begin with, I would like to define the notion of private tutoring which includes private lessons offered to any individuals outside of mainstream schooling. Interestingly, it became more widespread with the introduction of the UNT. As stated by Silova (2009), "Private tutoring has become particularly important in the context of the increasing demand for higher education during the transformation period" (p. 63).

Nowadays, private lessons became very popular to apply successfully to universities (Silova, 2009). As an enrolment to higher education institutions was based on the result of the UNT, school leavers were in need of private tutoring because everyone wanted to get a high score. As school leavers were also afraid of poor results they could get in examinations, they began to hire tutors, thus increasing their importance in the sphere of education. Therefore, private tutoring now plays a significant role in the sphere of education, as there is a great demand of tutors in subjects taken in the UNT.

Hence, students started investing in private lessons to get a wider possibility of receiving state grants. This allows students to avoid paying for their education for the whole four-year bachelor's program. The interesting thing is that the student's final mark in a certificate depends on his or her good preparation and diligence. For instance, if a school leaver gets good marks in those subjects that are included in testing and then at a real examination testing he or she gets excellent marks, then the final mark will also be excellent. Therefore, he or she will be given a school certificate with an excellent mark on that particular subject. Thus, there is a great need of hiring tutors nowadays as students can, firstly, improve their marks and, secondly, get a governmental scholarship to enter university. This is not fair, though, for the ones who studied hard throughout the academic year but was unlucky on the test day.

In fact, the UNT can be a way to get a grant, even for those who have never studied well, but prepared for the test extensively by means of private lessons. Thus, the importance of private tutoring has appeared. The reason is that chances for getting governmental scholarships are almost equal. As there is an equal access to educational services for students taking the UNT, school leavers, particularly those whose knowledge was not enough to get as high a score as possible, feel the need to hire private tutors.

Taking into account all those facts, private tutoring seems to affect secondary schools in different ways. On the good side, it may enhance students' motivation to learn. However, on a negative side private tutoring really disrupts the school curriculum. The reason is that students do not consider the whole year curriculum in a school. The main reason for this disruption is that they aim to pass five subjects in the UNT and get certificate than consider final year curriculum.

The quality gap between rural and urban areas is another problem associated with private tutoring. As mentioned in the study by Silova (2010),

The rural and urban divide in the use of private tutoring was most evident in Central Asia, where the proportion of private tutoring consumers from urban areas exceeded the number of students from rural areas by approximately 24 percentage points. (p. 333)

The fact is that students from urban areas are more able to pay for private tutoring than those from rural ones. Therefore, tutoring is popular for those children whose parents can pay extra money for individual lessons (Silova, 2009, p. 85). For example, children from higher income families are more ready for the UNT because of the private lessons taken. As a result, these children can get better access to state grants than their counterparts from lower income families. This suggests that there should be more qualified teachers in rural areas so that school leavers could pass their test with better results (OECD, 2007). This has already been undertaken by MoES, which encourages teachers to work in remote areas.

Further, the UNT has some disadvantages. For example, while preparing for tests students may become more nervous and the pressure put on students to perform well can lead to tragic results. Specifically, some students commit suicide because of the bad score they got on the UNT (Ussupova, Kamalova, & Kuzmina, 2015). The reason may be that some children despair that they might not pass the national exam. As stated by one of the students who was concerned about the UNT,

...their teachers always say that if they do not pass it they will not enter any university or even get a certificate about the graduation, and parents say that in case their child does not get enough points on the test they will not pay for his studies, he has to earn [a living] himself. That is why they [lose] their interest and hope in life if they fail. (Kazakhnomad, 2011, para. 6)

The psychologists added, “[The] UNT seems to be the main reason for the spring summer suicide among adolescents” (Zhumaliyeva, 2009, para. 1). Is the UNT a successful policy then?

There has also been a trend for school teachers to “focus on the examination and to ignore aspects of the curriculum that are not tested directly and that do not contribute to better examination results, such as extended writing” (Hill, 2010, p. 10). Thus, the next issue concerns a new subject titled *Course preparation for the UNT*, which was an informal part of the curriculum. Intensive preparations for the UNT are considered one of the most important stages in the life of the school leavers of the country. Students do not study the final year curriculum for the whole year. The reason for this is that they prepare for testing thus forgetting about their other subjects. Effectively, the whole year curriculum is based on the UNT preparation. This focus on the UNT emphasizes the importance of core subjects throughout the final year of their course, depending on the school. For instance, some schools begin to prepare their students at the beginning of the first semester at Grade 11, while others prepare beginning in the last term. Some intellectual schools even start preparing students for the UNT in Grade 10, which means that the main attention is being paid on core subjects (Education Department of Karaganda Region, 2016).

All of this leads to narrowing of the curriculum. As an alternative, it may be more reasonable to give more choices for students to select the subjects they are tested on. It is difficult, for instance, for students from humanitarian classes to pass math, as they are not as strong at science and technology. Why not leave them a choice so that everyone would be happy with this or that certain subject without having difficulty in passing the UNT? Math may be considered one of the core subjects in school, but why must children pass that subject if they do not know it well? It limits the interest of students who cannot pass those subjects they are good at, because they need to pass compulsory subjects.

Summing up, the UNT has influenced not only students’ final year at school, but also their future. These important issues deserve further attention: private tutoring; the importance of core subjects, which led to a narrowing of a school curriculum; the hidden curriculum titled *Course preparation for the UNT*; and the quality gap in education among various population groups.

Conclusion

There are various opinions on whether the UNT is a successful assessment policy or not. TV and newspapers often present the view that the UNT should be cancelled, made voluntary or include complex analytical tasks like those added in 2016 (Bagrova, 2016, para. 3). However, the best solution here may be to make the UNT optional.

My experience with the UNT and the various critiques of the UNT led to an exploration of the reasons why the UNT was introduced in Kazakhstan. I discussed some critiques made around the UNT. Following the

significant changes since its introduction, the MoES, in turn, has tried to find solutions whenever it faces problems. For instance, the former minister of education and science Bakhytzhan Zhumagulov mentioned that there is a need to improve the UNT, clarifying that “the format will not change...the quality of the tests needs to be improved” (“Format”, 2011, para. 2-3).

This suggests that the structure is good in the UNT, but not the content. There should be more creative tasks. The essence lies in the fact that a child could think creatively and imaginatively to solve the tasks set before him in a national test. However, there is also a novelty in the current system, which offers that starting from 2017 the UNT will be taken only by prospective university students of Kazakhstan, while school leavers are expected to pass their final certification in the form of traditional examinations (Gulyayeva, 2016).

To sum up, the key drivers and noticeable impacts of the UNT have led to several changes since its introduction. It will further change as years go by, ideally towards better assessment of the students’ knowledge throughout 11 years of school. Hopefully, these changes will help re-emphasize a broader range of compulsory knowledge in the final year of study in the school, rather than focusing on assessment by solely practicing and preparing to pass the UNT.

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