Improving Quality of Education in Russia through
Transforming Quality Assurance Systems

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s it became obvious that society was changing so substantially that the education system could no longer cope with new requirements: people no longer wanted their children to learn Marxist dogmas or to read books written by good members of the Communist party. Instead, they wanted them to learn foreign languages, the quality knowledge of which had been a privilege of a limited few, and they wanted them to understand the market economy and to be prepared for life in the new society which, as everyone believed, was to become an open one. An open society needed an open system of education. Therefore the reforms were all aimed at unlocking the previously closed system and, to a certain extent, we succeeded in meeting this goal.

Early 1990s: Liberalization of the system

The discussion about a new school system for an open society started in the mid-1980s when Gorbachov came to power. The reform agenda was developed through public debates and even the final reform plan was developed by a very diverse brainstorming team composed of researchers, managers from all levels of education administration, school principals, teachers and even pre-school educators. The team was led by the future Minister of Education, Eduard Dneprov. Sadly, though, the team lacked people from outside the education system.

The thrust of the reform was to do away with the highly politicized, Soviet content of teaching and the unitarian school, which had 100 per cent mandatory curriculum, one set of textbooks for all school children across the Soviet Union, and standard school buildings from north to south. The only elements that were not properly standardized were school standards and assessment procedures.1 Ten principles of education reform formulated in those days can give an idea of the scope of changes envisaged. Those were:

- Democratization of school management and school life
- Diversification of education patterns, curricula, etc.
- National identity building as one of the key missions of a school
- Openness of the system
- Regionalization of school policy
- Humanistic policy
- Humanitarian anti-dogmatic approach
- Personality-oriented learning
- Developmental character of education
- Life-long learning

However, resources for such comprehensive changes were lacking. The system was grossly underfunded; this is why most of the changes which were implemented in those days dealt mainly with school legislation and decentralization of school management. The law On Education, produced in 1992, was recognized by the international community as one of the most

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1 School standards in Soviet Russia were input-based, defining content to be taught, projected outcomes were not defined or standardized. Assessment was institution based and assessment criteria were not described. Therefore, each school or university had its own system of criteria and marking systems varied quite significantly from school to school.
liberal laws in the history of Europe. More obvious obstacles for an open and democratic school system, such as a politicized curriculum full of Soviet stereotypes, were much more resistant to change because in order to change what was taught, you had to change the mindset of teachers. Western countries, enchanted by Russia’s sudden political changes, were most willing to help with more substantial agenda and were prepared to spend significant sums of money to assist school reforms. However, Russian decision makers were then not experienced enough to make informed choices and welcomed almost any idea coming from the West. As a consequence, a lot of resources were wasted on insignificant transformations and low-priority projects. The most significant accomplishment of those days was diversification within the system, some of which was informed by international contacts: new school patterns began to appear, regions and schools got control over up to 25 to 30 per cent of school curriculum, choices and options were introduced into the curriculum, a market of school textbooks began to develop, and parents could choose schools for their children. However, in the absence of a new understanding of quality of education and rigorous quality assurance procedures, the acquired freedom was often breeding chaos and inconsistencies within the system.

1998-2004: Rationalizing the system and introducing technologically valid procedures

At the very end of the 20th century, the economic situation in the country began to stabilize and the leadership of the Ministry of Education started planning a new comprehensive reform. This time Minister Filipov and his team spent a lot of time ensuring that Russia learned from the best world examples of education reforms and that reliable data on how the Russian education system compared with those leading countries became available. This reform may be described as a technological one: it specified new goals, such as key skills and competencies, which PISA had shown our students were lacking, and emphasized learner autonomy, school rule of law, creativity, tolerance and communication skills in foreign languages. But unlike the previous attempt, it was concentrating on mechanisms which would enable the system to function in an effective and efficient way. Some mistakes were made in the beginning. Thus attempts to create competition within the system led to the appearance of quasi-markets, such as lots of private higher education institutes engaged in selling certificates. An idea to offer state scholarships to pay university tuition fees for the top-performing students also never took any shape within the system.

But some ideas did take root. This was the time when a true dialogue with the West started; most of the mechanisms that were introduced into the system were adapted from Western analogues. The most important innovations dealt with:

- A new generation of standards, meant to be outcome based
- ICT reform, perhaps the only one which was emphasizing teacher training
- Introduction of an independent system of quality assurance and external exams
- Formula-based funding
- Optimization of the school system and school buses, which were not available in Russia before
- Introduction of quality standards for textbook production
- Reliable data gathering for evidence-based policy decisions.

The majority of these innovations survive to this day. School standards were perhaps the only failure; those were developed by academics who lacked school experience and were only too happy to embrace all new ideas without attempting to understand them. Thus the number of “key skills” they identified was close to 450. Also, the standards remained input-based, specifying the content to be taught rather than the expected outcomes. The latter were defined in a very vague way and the majority of them were impossible to measure. ICT reform was successful and perhaps the most celebrated in the country; it delivered hardware into every school, including
small rural ones, and offered training to hundreds of thousands of school teachers. However, the
effect of this training was smaller than expected: for most teachers this was a one-off training
session and they had no opportunity to come back and ask questions as they were starting
practicing their skills.

The new school-leaving exam which also qualified students for university entry was the most
disputed reform. It was severely attacked by the university lobby; they suddenly lost control over
student enrolment, which was previously a major source of their shadow income. Their
resistance delayed the country-wide unified exam introduction by almost eight years. However,
the transition to the new system has now happened and has inspired further changes, such as
Grade 9 external exams and the introduction of RuSyQA, which we will discuss later.

The optimization of the school system was a success in certain regions, particularly where the
road system and distances could allow school buses. Very small schools were made redundant or
brought under one leadership umbrella and resources were used more effectively. Formula-based
funding has been introduced across the entire country; however, formula development skills are
still not sufficient for making the new system work. SEN children and migrants in particular do
not get enough support in mainstream schools due to poorly developed formulae in some
regions. A new data-processing system introduced by the Centre of Educational Statistics was
probably the least noticed by the broader public, yet it was extremely important for proper
analysis and evidence-based planning. For the first time in its post-Soviet history, Russia began
to have reliable information on how the education system functioned.

2004 - onwards: Investment in leaders and growing centralization

The second term of President Putin (2004-2008) was a time of major investments in education
and the introduction of a so-called system of national grants. Never before in the history of
Russia were such significant amounts of money made available to celebrate the best teachers,
best schools and best universities. Best teachers were selected on the basis of questionnaires,
which parents, graduates and school principals had to fill out. Those selected as best teachers
received a bonus of $3,000 to 3,500 each, which they were free to spend as they wished. Schools
had to produce development plans and those who could meet all the prescribed criteria were
given money for procurement and training purposes.

Unfortunately, even before they could see the colour of that money ($30,000 to 35,000 each),
schools were state audited for how they spent it. The time allowed for its spending was too short
and schools were buying unnecessary equipment in a great hurry to be able to fit into the
prescribed spending schedule. Universities had very similar reporting headaches but bigger
grants, and the university system indeed got significant development opportunities. Yet many
experts would say that this big initiative only contributed to a greater discrepancy between the
rich and the poor. Successful schools servicing either children of richer parents or students
chosen on the basis of their abilities and skills were becoming even better equipped, while
schools catering to children from socially deprived families were not seen as strong competitors
when compared with the former and therefore got nothing.

Russian schools are not clustered. Therefore selection of winners took no account of
backgrounds and contexts. Attempts to disseminate the best practices of the winners also were
not very successful, because they were poorly organized and not monitored properly. Some of
these initiatives were meant to be further refined by the new president’s administration, but
unfortunately the economic crisis of 2009 interfered with such plans.
Education policy in the first decade of the 21st century can be characterized by greater centralization ("the verticalization of power," as the government describes it). Yet another set of school standards allowing much less diversification has robbed the regions of Russia of the opportunity to introduce their own components into school curriculum: ethnic languages, history and cultures are almost impossible to accommodate within the very limited space offered by the authors of new standards, which means that federalism in education policy is being gradually replaced by uniformity. Attempts to find universal solutions for the entire system of such scope and diversity—Russia has over 120 ethnicities that are indigenous to its territory and an exponentially growing inflow of migrants—are doomed to failure. Another consequence of growing nationalism is xenophobia and suspicious attitudes to innovations coming from the West. The dialogue with some of the best performing systems has become less intensive; partnership projects continue to exist but they experience massive logistical problems created by the new Russian legislation adopted in the absence of alternative views.

The policy documents produced by the Ministry of Education may be best described by a slogan: "How to change without changing anything." They name a lot of goals but are very unspecific in describing expected outcomes. Thus “Our New School” initiative, released in 2009, describes the following goals:

- Transition to new standards
- External assessment at three levels
- New requirements for teachers
- Support to gifted and handicapped
- New school infrastructure
- Greater school autonomy.

All of these goals are good and valid, but it is not always possible to see what stands behind these good words: very few exact mechanisms or policies are named. In some cases, such as external assessment, expected innovations are already in place and require very little effort to support.

Should we then say that the current education policy is in a deadlock? Hardly so. Russia has always possessed a reform community which continued bottom-up reform activities in places where the local administration was supportive and where demonstrable results could be reached. They will continue piloting innovations and preparing policy documents in anticipation of opportunities to launch them on a country-wide scale.

Main accomplishments

When we look back at what Russian education was like 20 years ago and compare it with the current status quo, the following changes may be called most significant:

- Diversification and choices within the curriculum and the system at large
- System of external standardized exams
- Data collection system fit for evidence-based management
- The principle of formula-based funding.

Although the government remains centralization-focused and, while pursuing this policy, has removed many options within school standards, institutional patterns and school curriculum, the system remains significantly more diversified than it used to be. Schools manage to get around restrictions to introduce the content that parents want. Even in such cases as an attempt to introduce a course on the basics of orthodox religion into secular state schools of a multi-cultural and multi-confessional state, the system reacted in a highly diversified way. Some ethnic republics insisted on introducing their predominant religions instead, and some have introduced a
course on the history of religion and ethics. Continuous attempts to limit the number of textbooks offered to school students create a lot of agitation and discomfort but in their substance largely fail.

The system of external standardized exams, regardless of all the criticism, has played a very important role: it has dealt with the obsolete, subjective and time-consuming system of dual, mostly oral exams, upon leaving school and entering university. This has brought more equity of opportunities, particularly for students of remote Russian regions who can now enter the best universities without spending a lot of money on travel. External exams have provided excellent feedback into the system, allowing decision makers to compare schools and university entry requirements. These are exams that play the role of outcome-based standards today: in the absence of well-defined and measurable school standards, they offer a set of norms school graduates must comply with and do so in a transparent, open form. There is room for improvement as regards to quality of individual test items and elements of procedures, but the benefits far exceed the drawbacks.

The much improved system of data gathering is also important for informed decision-making. Russia now can participate in the vast majority of international surveys and reviews, whereas previously it could not for lack of reliable data.

Although existing mechanisms of formula-based funding are far from being perfect, it is important that the very principle is in place. In older days, the Russian government was funding institutions but often neglecting their actual size and capacity. A per capita principle stimulates competition and development within the system and brings more fairness into the distribution of resources.

Reasons for concern

We are greatly alarmed about the continuing low level and negative dynamics of results of Russian students in international surveys, primarily PISA. While PIRLS results remain stably positive and even improving (last year, the Russian Federation led the league table), in PISA Russia is much below OECD average in all tested skills. See Figure 1.
A vocational education system is inadequate for the needs of the modern labour market and its standards are still not sufficiently informed by employers. Moreover, employers seldom can contribute to quality standards at the level needed for a proper transition to a market-led vocational education and training (VET) system. The poor quality of the system is accountable for the fact that many young people, after graduating from VET institutions, remain unemployed. See Figure 2.

Figure 1:

Figure 2:
Higher education system quality has significantly deteriorated in the last decades. Attempts to reform it have largely failed. A transition to a two-tier system has been declared several times, but has been sabotaged by universities. The poor quality of higher education can also be explained by its mass character: according to some data (HSE reports), almost 100 per cent of school graduates enter higher educational institutions as entry requirements are very low and keep lowering. As a result, Russia is losing its reputation in the international higher education market. See Figure 3.

Figure 3:

As a consequence, the already significant gap in access to quality education keeps growing and there is a serious risk of marginalization of certain groups of the population. Each PISA review demonstrates a shrinking number of top-performing students and a larger and larger number of those who deliver at the lowest levels of academic performance. See Figure 4.
Figure 4:

Growing gap in access to quality education and marginalization of certain groups of population

This is the reason why significant investments into education have so far had little effect upon national economic growth. See Figure 5.

Figure 5:

Main issues that require serious attention from reform-makers are therefore as follows:
- Evidence-based management is not a reality. Most prerequisites for it are now in place but significant policy decisions are often made disregarding available data.
• Public accountability exists at a rudimentary level. The very concept of public accountability is not a part of Russian educational or political thesaurus.
• Standards and curricula remain input-based and therefore immeasurable.
• Formative assessment is not effective in most schools and the concept is misunderstood by most teachers.
• The teaching force is not fit for the reform agenda and the teacher education and training system is obsolete and inefficient.
• Staff policy is poorly developed and the system of pre-service and in-service training has not been reviewed since Soviet days. International data is neglected and in the country, research is superfluous.

**RuSyQA and transformation of the national quality assurance system**

Attempts to create a new country-wide system of quality assurance were to a great extent an answer to most of the above problems. Apart from the unified exam, there were several more successful initiatives in the quality assurance area in Russia:

• The introduction of public accountability at all levels of the system is now discussed both in the professional community and at the top levels of the government, where a “steering by outcomes” scheme is being explored. Some demonstrations of public accountability can be seen at a school level, such as public reports of school principals.
• The introduction of a multi-level system of national exams is intended to create a multi-level external and standardized assessment system. Two out of three planned external exams are now in place but the absence of multi-level standards is the main hindrance to the scheme.
• The shift of focus towards formative assessment is accepted as a policy guideline and practicalities are discussed at the professional community level.
• Efforts to advocate outcome-based national educational standards are continuing. Alternative groups of standard developers have been formed and public debates are held in the President’s administration (Public Chamber) and in other public meetings.
• The introduction of evidence-based school and local education systems’ assessment has been a consequence of external exams and, in the beginning, was creating more problems than clarity. Attempts to use external exams data to rank schools regardless of their context have annoyed schools and stimulated discussions about fair means of school assessment. Value-added principles began to be explored.
• First steps in establishing a public audit have been made and newly established school governance bodies have taken the lead. Associations of school governors have compiled checklists, which allow them to audit not just the academic services but also the ethos and environment existing within a school.

In 2005, the development of a country-wide system of quality assurance began to be discussed and publications became available. The very aim of the Russian System of Quality Assurance (RuSyQA) is to make the system accountable to its clients: individuals, families, civil society, employers and state structures. If one bears in mind that for almost a hundred years the system was accountable only to the state, the importance of this paradigm shift is hard to underestimate.
The concept of RuSyQA

The elements of the system that are being developed so far are as follows:

- A multi-level system of assessing academic achievement of students after primary school, at a level of a transition to upper secondary school and at a school graduation level.

- A multi-purpose system of school assessment consisting of state accreditation which must include social and developmental characteristics of a school apart from its academic performance data; value-added assessment at the school level and other forms of evaluation performed with a purpose to assist students, teachers and schools in their growth and development; school self-evaluation and public audit, the data of which should be made available to parents.

- A multi-component system of assessing performance of whole educational systems requiring data both within and outside the system (public health agencies, police, social workers, etc.) with a well-developed data collection infrastructure and means of public accountability, such as regional or federal public reports and audits.

Changes to the school graduation examination system and entrance exams to higher education institutions, as well as the introduction of the Unified State Examination (USE) may be viewed as the most significant elements of the assessment system reform and the national education system reform. The main results, impact and lessons of the USE implementation are mentioned below.

Social Impact

The USE became a real mechanism to support democratization of education. School graduates got a real chance to choose a higher education institution. Every student, regardless of social background and place of residence, got a chance to send his or her USE certificate with scores to any university, or several of them simultaneously, and take part in the competition. Moscow, Saint Petersburg and other major cities saw a growing number of students from other regions. Leading universities started to work for the benefit of the entire country.

The exam struck a blow to the corruption related to university entrance exams. Now, students are enrolled in the universities on the basis of USE scores only, and there is no need to pay an
‘entrance ticket,’ such as giving bribes or paying for private tutors from that university to guarantee enrolment.

Society, parents and students can quite effectively assess the quality of schools and tertiary education facilities, keeping in mind the average USE score of graduates and entrants.

The USE results became one of the performance indicators for the Russian Federation government to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of regional education authorities as well as the general performance of the executive authorities of the subjects of the Russian Federation. This assessment provides a direct impact on the size of monetary grants allocated from the federal budget to the regions.

*Political Support as a Driving Factor of Changes*

The assessment system was reformed with strong political support. The decision to introduce the USE was initiated by the central government. In the context of transition to performance-based budgeting and management, the federal government needed objective and trustworthy information on the real situation in education. In 2001, the Ministry of Education of Russia was charged with the task to develop a new examination model.

It was critically important that the political support was provided during the entire period of experimenting with the USE. Without this support, it would have been hardly possible to give the USE the official status of a state examination, as it enjoyed very little support in the society. (A very well-known rule worked in this case: voices against a new idea sound always louder than those of champions.) Several professional groups immediately started opposing the USE openly.

Teachers and schools were used to assessing their students themselves and did not trust external control. In addition, a new practice started to gain ground when quality of teacher and school work for the purposes of school and teacher certification was based on the USE results. The USE started to acquire high-stake assessment features and therefore was not favoured by the professional community.

Higher education system officials did not trust the testing methods; they wanted to identify knowledge levels and capabilities of their candidate students during an entrance exam in a live dialogue. In reality there were some hidden motives there too, such as the wish to control additional cash flows (direct bribes paid to some university staff, fees paid to private tutors and for preparatory courses delivered by higher education institutions), and an unwillingness of rectors to lose their ‘administrative currency,’ or the ability to ensure enrolment of entrants from the ‘rector’s list’ of students with high-ranking or ‘useful’ parents.

Many politicians and mass media did their best to persuade the public that the USE was killing the world-class Russian education system, as it would check just the most primitive skills and would fail to assess the creative potential of a student’s personality.

The USE introduction record has demonstrated that political will and consistency in implementation play a key role in the reform of a national examination system.

*Provision of Support through Public Discussion*

A wide public discussion was organized in order to attract additional support for the USE idea and to provide well-reasoned answers to the objections of its opponents.
This examination was discussed openly and systematically in printed and electronic media, on TV and radio, on the Internet, and during various meetings, conferences and forums. The discussion was not limited to a professional community; it involved students, parents, employers and members of different social groups.

It would be unfair to say that the discussion resulted in a drastic change of attitude to the USE. Even now, public opinion is not unanimous about this novelty. However, without the discussion, society ran a risk of losing the USE champions and all public support. The USE provided the first experience of a broad public discussion of education issues.

USE and national education quality assessment system

The USE introduction spurred further development of the Russian education assessment system. The following changes have taken place:

- Educational measurement culture emerged and started to develop in the country, with specialists and entire organizations working on this topic.
- Regional quality assessment systems started to take shape. Regional Centers for USE Information Processing served as the basis for regional education quality assessment centers in many cases. In addition to the USE-related work, they organized other procedures for education quality assessment, including regional monitoring surveys. This allowed us to take full advantage of human resources, methodology and technology capacity built as part of the USE effort.
- The USE technology was used to develop and implement an exam for basic school graduates (SFC-9) on a pilot basis.
- The analysis of solutions for specific USE items provided an opportunity to develop detailed selective recommendations for teachers, methodology advisors, authors of textbooks and developers of education standards on how to improve the teaching and learning process.
- External quality assessment and assurance procedures, including certification of teachers and schools, started to take the USE results into account as one of many criteria to judge the quality of schools and teachers.
- The Russian results of participation in the international comparative studies of education quality assessment (PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS, etc.) started to be discussed at a greater level of detail due to the USE.

Some Issues Related to the USE Introduction

The USE gave rise to some issues and became the reason for certain negative developments. First, the transition to the USE resulted in a change to the learning process in high school in favour of preparation for this exam. Students started to focus mostly on the subjects in which they were going to take the exam (mathematics, the Russian language, and other subjects of their choice), their motivation to learn other disciplines fell dramatically. A share of practical and laboratory work in science reduced quite sharply, as the USE did not check the skills in organization and implementation of experimental work. Many students chose externship, where they study the high school curriculum (grades 10 and 11) during one year, doing it quite often superficially and formally, and then use another year to get ready for the USE by attending special preparatory courses or using private tutors’ services.

Second, the USE seeks to check the academic results (knowledge and skills) in a particular subject. Higher-level education results (general learning skills, research abilities, competencies, creative skills, physical development, etc.) are not evaluated under this exam. This situation
brought fair criticism from higher education institutions specializing in culture and art. Therefore, some universities and professional schools added entrance exams on subjects not tested in the USE, such as music and art. In addition, prize winners of all-Russian contests were allowed to enter higher education institutions without the USE. The leading universities of the country (a government-approved list of 11 such universities) may subject their entrants to one additional exam in the profile subject to be able to select the best prepared candidates.

Another problem contributing to the lower trust in the exam is related to information security issues. There is evidence of information leaks on the USE items (e.g., publication of item options in the Internet the day before the exam) and breach of the USE procedures (use of mobile phones, fictitious persons, and “problem solvers” who include teachers themselves sometimes). In this regard, one cannot overestimate the importance of such issues as public control over the USE implementation, openness and transparency of the USE procedures, publication of its results and a chance of appealing against the USE results.

**CICED and the main content of its work**

Another demonstration of growing attention to issues of quality assurance is the establishment of the Centre for International Cooperation in Education Development (CICED). CICED was established as a result of G-8 meeting in Moscow. Its purpose is to build capacity in quality assurance in Russia and countries of the World Bank READ program (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola, Kenya and some others). The centre is funded by the Russian Ministry of Finance and currently supports the following activities:

- Empowerment of current research and development staff in Russia and READ countries through trainings and study visits
- Support for the development of two MEd programs specializing in quality assurance in Russia (potentially servicing other READ countries)
- Support for the development of new tests assessing productive skills of pupils
- Support for the design of a new generation of ICT competence test
- Secondary analysis of international surveys data
- Support for the evidence based quality enhancement using statistical tools
- Raising awareness of decision makers.

These activities started a year and a half ago, and their major effect has been to consolidate the quality assurance community, develop an international network and bring quality assurance and public accountability to the attention of key decision makers. CICED is also a body that will not allow our traditional scenario of losing interest immediately after a planning stage: this is a project-based centre and it must see all the plans through.