

Kazakhstan: Poor Marks for New School Exams

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Innovative examination system seems like a good idea but experts highlight flaws in the way it was brought in.

School-leavers across Kazakhstan have just put down their pens after completing what the government hails as a bold new examination programme, revolutionising education and streamlining university entry.

But education experts have criticised the authorities for pressing ahead with an untried system. The result, they say, was headaches for this year's crop of school-leavers, and unsatisfactory measurement of their performance.

The new system is a departure from the old school-leaving certificate examination, a holdover from Soviet time, and now combines final-year exams with university entry testing. Three subjects are compulsory - mathematics, the history of Kazakhstan, Kazak or Russian as a first language, and a free choice of the fourth subject.

The examinations are based on multiple-choice testing rather than the old system of oral examinations. The authorities hope the more objective and standardised methods will reduce stress levels among students as well as making it harder to slip the examiner a bribe.

After piloting the exam system in a few larger towns last year, the government invested close to four million dollars to provide testing centres across the country, and the students, most of them aged 18, sat the new exams between June 10 and 15.

On June 22, Prime Minister Danial Akhmetov gave a glowing report, telling a cabinet meeting that "everything that we've heard here today shows that the concept of education reform was adopted correctly."

Two days later, on June 24, a leading education pressure group gave a distinctly less upbeat assessment of the way things had gone.

At a press conference organised by the Urapk Tagdyry Bilim group (which translates as Knowledge is the Future for a Generation), its head Ersain Erkoja said the new system had failed to test knowledge adequately and created more stress than ever.

He also said schoolchildren from minority groups were discriminated against since there was no provision for those whose mother tongue was not Kazak or Russian, the two main languages used in the country.

Erkoja placed the blame squarely on the education ministry, accusing it of failing to do sufficient groundwork.

"The Unified National Testing was conducted without proper experimentation, and school-leavers were unprepared for it. The rules for introducing it were not publicised in the media, and not all school-leavers were aware of them," he said.

A further problem, he said, was that some of the examination questions had not been covered in the curriculum, because they were drawn up by university lecturers rather than schoolteachers.

The figures show a failure rate of 24 per cent, but Erkoja suggested that many of the students who got a "satisfactory" mark but left many questions unanswered should be counted as fail scores.

The poor results claimed by Koja's group were, he said, a result of poor planning and inadequate time to complete the exams.

"Children who live 100 or 150 kilometres away from a testing centre had to be driven there starting out at three or four in the morning, so they didn't have time to rest beforehand," he said, pointing out that this hit those from rural areas the hardest.

"Little time was given to answer 120 questions - only three hours. It is impossible to solve 30 mathematical problems in that time."

Raushan Kabilova, who teaches at the National Al-Farabi University, agrees that "even good students could have scored badly in the Unified National Testing. Children as well as parents should have been prepared for it. This is a serious problem."

Kabilova told IWPR that she welcomed new education initiatives but warned, “I am against these innovations being introduced all at once. Other countries have entire institutions that arrange research and sociological surveys before implementing new systems. We don’t, and that’s the root of all the problems.”

As a way of making cheating harder, each student was issued with one of 800 different sets of questions to answer. But school-leavers interviewed by IWPR complained that this made the exam something of a lottery, and some thought they had been treated unfairly.

“In my maths test there were six algebra problems and eight for geometry,” said Aset, a school-leaver in the capital Astana. “Nurik had only one [maths] problem and not single geometry question. He got a higher maths score than me.”

Svetlana Konzaeva, a former teacher who now gives private tuition in mathematics, said she spotted some mistakes in exam papers.

“I taught my students using last year’s [pilot] test papers and sample tests from this year,” she told IWPR. “There were several equations for which two correct [multiple choice] answers were given. How should children know which of these correct answers will be marked as the right one?”

With the randomly issued test papers, the authorities were confident that they could significantly reduce cheating, and they issued a statement warning students not to believe anyone offering to sell them a crib since no one could guess what the questions would be.

But some of those doing the exams reported that their classmates did get answers in advance.

“We knew about the [education] ministry statement, and we were hoping everything would be fair. But we were fooled,” said Renat, also from Astana.

“There’s a girl in my class whose father has a high-ranking job. Not only did she know all the right answers, she also knew how much she would score. She used to get ‘satisfactory’ marks.”

Kabilova said that while the new system will not eradicate corruption together, it will certainly reduce the number of people who can get access to answers beforehand. And that, at least, is an improvement on the past.

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