

## **Unified National Test in the Russian language: a faculty perspective**

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### **Unified National Test vs. traditional system of entry examinations.**

The year 2009 marked Russia's transition from the traditional system of university examinations to a standardized national test for university admission. Unified National Test (UNT) is considered one of the major "pillars of modernization" (Gounko & Smale, 2007) of the ongoing educational reform as well as a fundamentally new initiative. It was developed and launched on an experimental basis in 2001 as a combination of school leaving tests and university entry examinations. In the Soviet-era system of education, there was no single nationwide school leaving or university admission test, and the university selection procedure was based on a series of competitive entrance examinations. Co-existence of separate final school exams and university entry exams created a number of tensions within the system. Individual universities determined their own entrance exam procedure, minimal passing scores and grading criteria, and in practice had monopoly and discretion over the admissions (Osipyan, 2007). Due to widespread bribery and corruption, the criteria for admission were often not student academic achievements, but money, social status and personal connections. The system often favored graduates of elite schools or applicants whose parents could afford private tuition from university faculty, putting at a huge disadvantage students from remote and rural regions of Russia.

UNT as a new form of enrolment was designed to redress the deficiencies of the traditional university admissions system. As an external tool for the school leavers' performance assessment, the aim of UNT was to introduce an independent quality control mechanism into the Russian education, enhance school-leaver's mobility, provide equal access to higher education for school-leavers from urban and rural areas, and reduce opportunities for corruption (Gounko & Smale, 2007; Larionova, 2002). Replacing the old system of entry exams with a single national test is believed to make the transition between secondary school and university smoother and fairer for university applicants. With one major standardized test used across the country, school leavers will have to take fewer tests which will reduce exam anxiety and exam-related stress. The new test will also objectify the process of knowledge assessment. The new system of enrolment will be based on more secure testing grounds than the previous assessment forms as answers on UNT are graded by either computers (in multiple choice sections) or specially trained independent experts (in short written answers and essays). UNT is developed and

produced centrally by the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation. The exam for all subjects consists of three parts: A, B, and C. In part A, test-takers are asked to choose the correct answer out of a number of suggested answers. Part B consists of one-word answers or fill-in-the-blank questions. In part C, the test-takers are asked to solve various tasks and problems, or give a detailed written answer. The results of the examination are assessed on the basis of a unified scale. Parts A and B are fully computerized and are processed automatically. Part C is evaluated by two independent human examiners who are specialists of the regional testing centres. The exam is scored on a 100-point scale, and the results are converted into the traditional five-point system, “1” and “2” being unsatisfactory grades, “3” - satisfactory or “pass”, “4” - fair or good, and “5” - excellent. Individual student scores can be accessed by students on the UNT official website and can be used as basis for admission to higher education institutions.

Since its trial in 2001, UNT has stirred up heated debate and continues to be highly controversial a few months before its nationwide implementation. Evaluations of UNT have ranged from “a key direction in the modernization of education” to “a three-letter outrage” (Smolin, 2005: 41). While some consider the exam to be the driving force of ongoing education modernization reform, others remain skeptical about the role of the exam in reforming Russia’s educational landscape. Proponents of UNT maintain that implemented alongside other reform measures, UNT has great potential in creating equal opportunities for access to higher education, preventing corruption, and making higher education a more demand-driven industry. Opponents put forward serious objections to the universal use of the examination and point out to new opportunities for malpractice, lack of regional infrastructure for the test administration, absence of public control and transparency in the exam administration and score reporting.

### **Regional faculty perspective: case study of a Russian language department**

In the assessment of UNT by the government and independent evaluation agencies little attention has been paid to the perception of UNT by regional university faculty members. However, since 2001, regional university administrators and faculty members have played a major role in the development of university policy with regard to UNT. Besides providing administrative and organizational support, they have been involved in marking UNT written sections and converting UNT marks into the traditional grading scale at their departments. University faculty members are closely familiar with the local context of exam implementation and are, together with regional school teachers, a valuable source of information about various issues associated with the delivery, content and functioning of the exam at regional and micro levels. Based on a case study of one Russian language department in a middle-range Russian Northwest regional university, this article discusses perceptions of UNT by faculty members and analyzes their personal reasons for supporting or opposing the universal implementation of UNT as well as their vision of the role of the exam in the educational reform. Out of the nine UNT tests in different subjects, the exam in the Russian Language was chosen as by far the most popular examination among Russian school-leavers since 2001. Qualitative data for this

case study was collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve out of fourteen faculty members carried out in July 2008. Thematic analysis of interview data was used as the main method of data analysis in this article. The overall analytical approach included identification of themes and recognition of patterns across the transcripts of individual interviews (Bernard, 2000). Elements of critical discourse analysis, such as analysis of patterns of speech as reflected in the choice of words, rhetorical means and metaphors used by respondents (Van Dijk, 1981; Lakoff 1987) were used as a method of data interpretation. This article presents a summary of findings within four major themes identified in the respondent's narrative. Opposing views on UNT are presented and contrasted within each theme. Through an in-depth analysis and interpretation of faculty members' assessment of UNT, this article probes into factors that determine perceptions of UNT by the regional faculty in the Russian educational and cultural contexts.

### **UNT's role in re-shaping school and admission requirements**

Out of the twelve faculty members interviewed, six respondents declared themselves to be in favour of UNT, five against it, and one undecided. All department members agree that UNT has had an impact on both the school curriculum and admission requirements. However, impact evaluations of those for the exam are dramatically different from those against it.

UNT opponents believe that the educational agenda set by the exam negatively affects both the school and the system of higher education. In their opinion, instead of testing the students' ability to utilize rules of spelling, syntax, grammar as well as communicative skills, UNT tests a passive isolated knowledge of basic linguistic rules. This bias towards passive knowledge of the Russian language causes schools to adjust their curricula to the requirements of UNT. According to those against the exam, this results in a curricula skew towards multiple choice type questions, schematism in instruction, drilling and automatizing passive rules and language formula during classroom hours:

“Children at school are only doing [practice] tests nowadays. They don't know the rules, don't revise, all they do is practice tests. Teachers don't explain the rules enough. Testing can only check precise rules, but in the Russian language there are multiple exceptions to any rule. There are many questions on exceptions in UNT, and everyone knows that. So children only learn exceptions nowadays but not the application of rules”.  
(Respondent 2)

As a result, when used as basis for university admission, UNT allows random and poorly prepared students “scrape through” (Respondent 2) into university by luck. Consequently, the students entering university are not academically prepared for the course of study. All UNT opponents strongly associate the exam introduction with the decline in the quality of the student body in the past few years:

“Before, there were spelling, punctuation and grammar mistakes in students’ exam answers but NOT speech mistakes. Now we are observing the full range of speech mistakes. When they present at conferences, students can not even properly read from their own papers. They can not form a complex sentence. The same applies to those 150-word answers on UNT. I think UNT is to blame – students don’t read, don’t speak. Moreover, they don’t think and don’t learn to express themselves”. (Respondent 5)

All UNT opponents appear especially critical of part C, which replaces the traditional genre of literary composition and involves a written answer in the form of a personal statement on a suggested topic or a short text review. Much of the opponents’ criticism of part C relates to the format of the expected student answer. Opponents strongly disapprove of multiple-choice type of questions, word limit for the written answer and essay structural requirements:

“Section C is a pathetic withered tree leaf. The whole answer is supposed to be structured according to certain technical parameters – for example, one should write no less than 150 words. This is utterly ridiculous. How should students program themselves to fit their idea into 150 words?! They are also requirements for the structure. There is no room left for the students’ own thoughts – everything is pre-programmed. «Choose a statement that best describes the author’s main idea». Only an idiot won’t be able to do that! The same with the author’s stance in the test, all the students are asked to do is agree or disagree in a few clumsy sentences and present a minimal argument. Sometimes it’s hard to decide whether the answer is a pass or non-pass so we are forced to calculate the number of words in the student answer. Oftentimes it’s 150 or 152, which means that the student has also probably done the word calculation. Is this called a creative independent task?!” (Respondent 2)

All opponents tend to analyze the drawbacks of the part C in comparison with the traditional genre of a literary composition that used to be the basis for admission to the Russian language department in the past. In their opinion, while literary composition allows for the realization of student creativity and individuality, UNT’s written section limits test-takers’ opportunities to demonstrate those skills and only allow them to show mastery of a limited set of standardized skills:

“What’s wrong with the C-section? It replaced a literary composition. Of course in a composition they used to cheat and memorize texts and copy but they still had to put bits together, link them with each other. Nowadays they are given a short text and asked to come up with some kind of a review. The language they’re using is poor, horrifyingly poor, and it’s only 150 words. When they used to write a composition, they had to express

their own opinion, thought, and here all we have is the “no less than 150 words” requirement. But no more than that either. 120 is already a disadvantage. Can you believe students are trained to do such a thing?” (Respondent 3)

A free-style written literary composition appears to the UNT opponents to be the only acceptable form of written test in the Russian language. Exam opponents do not see mastery of short written genres such as a short review or annotation as useful for contemporary school-leavers or suitable as a form of testing. Technical and content requirements of those genre as well as question types aimed at defining the main author’s idea are unequivocally perceived as drawbacks of the test.

In light of the perceived deficiencies of the test, UNT opponents believe that the use of UNT as basis for university admission in 2009 would have a disastrous impact on the school curricula and university instruction. As expressed by respondent 5, who opposes UNT, “If UNT results only are used for university admission, it will be a catastrophe”.

A fairly different perspective on the role of UNT in re-shaping school curriculum and reforming university admission is offered by UNT supporters. In their narrative, UNT is described as a mechanism of testing and selection that serves educational needs of an individual student and contemporary society in general.

According to the exam supporters, the main advantage of the test is its timeliness and relevance for contemporary Russian system of education. Proponents tend to view the exam in the context of educational challenges in Russia as well as in the context of world-wide educational trends: the need for standardization in the area of testing, the demand for introducing an element of public control into the system of education, and a need for transition from a knowledge-centred to a communication-centred approach in school pedagogy.

Unlike opponents, UNT supporters are aware of the fact that the exam is based on a well-tested model in terms of the exam structure and delivery and has counterparts throughout the world:

“The UNT model has been fully adopted from the West. The system has been tried and tested for many years. What UNT does is introduce strict state control over one of the state social divisions. There has long been a need for reform in that sphere, there are demands of the modern times and global influences”. (Respondent 6)

Furthermore, those in favour of UNT maintain that the introduction of a standardized exam into the Russian system of education in the beginning of the new millennium was necessitated by the declining educational standards in both secondary school and higher education as well as by the need for public control in educational sphere:

“According to recent social polls, expert evaluations and other research, Russian school is losing its good standing and credibility. Education in general is degrading. I think UNT as a federal initiative is an attempt to incorporate Russian education into the global education and global trends. (...) Also, there’s a need and [the government’s] intention to put school and general education under the public control. It’s an attempt to make education a public good, an attempt to take into account the needs of the consumers.” (Respondent 6)

All UNT proponents agree that contemporary Russian school is an outdated institute that needs to be reformed in terms of curricula, methods of instruction and internal organization. Opponents often refer to schools as “closed”, “totalitarian” and “archaic” institutions that miss their educational target. UNT proponents believe that UNT uncovers and helps to overcome what they consider major problems faced by Russian secondary schools in the area of Russian language instruction: outdated curricula and inflexible instruction methods. In the view of the UNT opponents, the existing school curricula focuses too much on formal grammar and too little on understanding of a text and development of oral and written self-expression:

“In school, there’s a bias towards grammar and spelling skills and teacher disinclination for the development of speaking skills. (..) One could say that school curriculum in a way misses its target. Children can correctly identify the case of a noun and know what a complex sentence is but oftentimes can not understand the main idea of a passage or adequately express their own thought”. (Respondent 10)

“I’ve always felt like in school we have been playing some kind of a game that had nothing to do with the reality. UNT brought to light the real problem – pupils do not understand the simplest texts. I think this is the most important thing UNT helped to pinpoint – but not solve yet.”(Respondent 11)

According to UNT supporters, the literary composition as the main testing tool lies at the root of the problem: it is an obsolete genre that has no relation to real-life skills. Respondents refer to the traditional methods of school instruction and testing as a game between pupils and teachers, in which pupils are taught separate grammar rules at input but are expected to show well-developed analytical skills and deep understanding of a literary text at the output.

Exam proponents think that compared to the literary composition, UNT short essays are better suited for the needs of a modern student and have caused school curricula to change in the right direction. More attention is now paid to teaching pupils to understand and become fluent in different written genres:

“(.) It [UNT] brings to light serious problems in school. Take the school leaving exam in Russian - a composition. It looked more like a game: teachers pretended to help pupils to unpack literary tests, pupils used to memorize and reproduce ready-made compositions. What did this have to do with understanding and analysis of the text? The school instruction has changed thank to UNT. What some derogatively call “drilling for UNT” is actually bringing good results. Pupils better see the point and the structure of a literary text. Improving UNT scores signify the fact that school is moving in the right direction. Pupils are now being taught using simple everyday life texts and are able to make sense of them.” (Respondent 7)

Contrary to the opponents’ opinion, UNT supporters believe that the new exam offers test-takers more opportunities to exercise their creativity and show individual talents:

“Questions in part C present an interesting topical problem. Oftentimes they contain certain traps that the test-takers need to avoid. This type of question is both challenging and doable. (..) UNT is less ambitious but allows talented pupils to exercise their creativity. It has its limitations but it offers more opportunities to show talents than the composition does”. (Respondent 9)

Exam proponents argue that the quality of student body has improved and not declined with the introduction of UNT: students who have taken UNT instead of the old exams better perform in Russian language exams and show more comprehensive understanding of the language structure and its stylistics functions. Proponents hope that UNT will eventually bring the system of instruction from a teacher-oriented approach to a more pupil-oriented approach as well as from a knowledge-centred to a communication-centred model.

### **Reliability of UNT as an assessment tool**

The respondents’ major argument against the use of UNT in the Russian language as a single nation-wide examination is the claim that the examination in its current form is an irrelevant, invalid and unreliable knowledge assessment tool. In their opinion, instead of testing mastery and creative use of the Russian language, UNT merely tests isolated linguistic features. Opponents argue that through the encouragement of drilling and guessing, multiple choice design of the test produces unreliable results and makes the process of applicant selection less objective:

“I don't see any advantages of UNT compared to the traditional exams. Objectivity? What objectivity are we talking about when a straight A student ends up scoring lower than a C student who accidentally happened to do well on the multiple choice section?” (Respondent 1)

To illustrate the point, UNT opponents often used anecdotal evidence from their own experience as educators and examiners. One professor quoted a parent of a test-taker as saying “our dumbbell ticked all answers in a zig-zag way and got “4”!” (Respondent 2)

When discussing the issue of guessing on the exam, UNT supporters view the phenomenon as a feature of a multiple choice-based testing system in general and insist on judging the exam validity in comparison with the other available tests such as a written composition or an oral examination answer. Opponents’ preference for traditional exams as being more indicative of applicants’ knowledge is disregarded by UNT supporters as a “delusion” (Respondent 9) and countered by the fact that applicants routinely cheat in traditional exams or memorize and re-produce ready-made answers at interviews.

All UNT proponents criticize the traditional system of entrance examinations for its lack of unified formal grading criteria:

“I consider it [UNT] to be more suitable than a composition which was a combined test in Russian and literature and which tested those disciplines in a non-formalized arbitrary way, giving way to the teacher bias and arbitrary judgment.” (Respondent 6)

According to UNT supporters, with the introduction of UNT, assessment was based, for the first time, on a set of clear-cut formal criteria as opposed to the examiner’s subjective judgment.

### **UNT’s role in eliminating regional disparities**

Those in favor of the old testing system are aware of a need to level off educational opportunities in Russian regional schools but do not see UNT as instrumental in solving the problem due to the deficiencies of the test such as its low reliability and poorly developed content. Those in favor of the oral system of entrance examinations prefer that university applicants are tested by examination committees at individual universities:

“One can not base the whole system of admission on a single unified examination. There absolutely has to be a written composition and an oral interview – we have to see who we are accepting. You understand that [Russia] is large county and no matter how hard we try to balance out regional differences, it’s extremely difficult to do so”. (Respondent 1)

Like UNT opponents, supporters also realize that regional disparities originate at the level of individual schools and can not be rooted out merely with the help of a single examination only. However, all UNT proponents agree that uniformity of content, provision and delivery of a single admission exam is crucial for equalizing educational opportunities available to regional students:

“Uniformity [of requirements] is always good in education. Among other things, it neutralizes regional differences in the admission process”.  
(Respondent 12)

Those supporting the exam argue that, given the size of the country and regional differences in the provision of educational services, a standardized test is the only way of unifying criteria for testing and admission. By standardizing requirements and unifying admission criteria, UNT equally serves university applicants and admission committees:

“[Before,] children coming from different schools with the same grades in their diplomas in reality had different levels of academic preparedness, and we always knew which schools to trust and which ones not to. UNT unifies the criteria.” (Respondent 8)

According to those in favour of the new exam, UNT allows applicants to get a fair assessment of their knowledge and choose a higher education institution on the basis of their academic abilities as reflected in their examination score. At the same time, it eliminates the factor of assessor subjectivity and provides university admissions committees with a reliable measure to judge applicants from different regions against each other.

### **UNT’s role in combating malpractice in entrance examinations**

All respondents acknowledged that malpractice is part of the admission system and is firmly built into admission practices. Nepotism, favoritism and protectionism were mentioned as most widespread forms of abuse at entrance examinations. Several respondents admitted having practiced protectionism as members of admissions committees, as illustrated in the quote below:

“From what I know, bribery in the strict financial sense is not practiced at [the university]. But there is nepotism and protectionism. When I am asked to take a look at an applicant’s paper [in entrance exams], I cordially do so. Firstly, because we can all understand poor parents who, in their delirium, hang on to any opportunity. As Chair of the Admissions Committee I have to re-check 5% of all graded entrance papers – why not check one particular paper I was asked to keep an eye on? There is always a 2-3 point leeway. Nothing criminal takes place but the students who are not being ‘protected’, find themselves at a disadvantage. This is something I’ve always felt uneasy about. Secondly, university administration also always has a leeway through the appeal committee. Imagine an appeal committee member looking through non-pass papers and going like “this will leave the university with no telephone connection, this – without this or that, this applicant was mentioned by Mr. this or that.. There’s always room for maneuver although all those factors have nothing to do with the

quality of the paper. All this makes entrance examinations an impure procedure. It's always a competition of parents and other interested entities". (Respondent 11)

While opponents did not see in what way UNT could be useful in fighting corrupt practices in Russian universities, proponents appear to have a strong opinion about the role of UNT in curbing those practices. Exam supporters argue that UNT objectifies the procedure and factors out family and professional connections as components of success at entrance examinations:

"UNT makes ethical situation [at entrance exams] much healthier. The test-taker is left vis-à-vis the test and can only rely on his or her knowledge. The whole system is designed in such a way that the exam is conducted by people who have no interest in the matter or the pupils." (Respondent 7)

The problem of student cheating appeared to be equally important for UNT opponents and proponents. One respondent called the issue of cheating "catastrophic for the Russian school" (Respondent 7):

"UNT solves one more problem that is catastrophic for the Russian schools, and that is the problem of cheating. I am always amazed at how foreign students behave in the exam. It's a mystery for me why students visiting from the UK don't cheat on exams when they have a chance to. The most striking thing is that it doesn't even occur to them. This means that they come from a school system that rigorously programs students for honest performance in the exam. In Russia, the situation is the opposite". (Respondent 8)

Respondents believe that the traditional system of school and university entrance examinations provides multiple opportunities for student cheating, including copying correct answers off their notes, memorizing and reproducing ready-made essays, consulting with their classmates in person and friends via cell phones. Cheating was referred to by respondents as a regular component of student academic life and a part of the Russian academic cultural in general. Several respondents talked about a culture of cheating that penetrates the system of testing at all educational levels. It was metaphorically described by one respondent as a teacher-student duel on a battlefield:

"For Russian pupils cheating is a matter of honour and heroism. They cheat and then they brag about it: "the examiner was searching high and low and all but looking under the skirt, and I managed to copy anyway". The examiner is undoubtedly perceived as an enemy and the exam as a battlefield where the final goal is not to test your knowledge but to beat the enemy. One of our tasks at entrance exams is to spot cheaters. This

often creates psychologically difficult situations because a pupils caught cheating sincerely doesn't understand HOW such a misfortune could have happened and why he is being prosecuted for it. Both the pupils and his relatives can't understand why an apology and a pledge not to cheat again is not enough. Latently, the presupposition is "how on earth did it happen that a pupils so skilled at cheating could have got caught? It never happened to him before." The fact that the admission committee often yields to the parents' arguments implies that everyone shares the same concept of cheating going unpunished". (Respondent 7)

In light of the permissive attitude to cheating behavior described in the quote above, UNT eliminates opportunities for student cheating as well as introduces and enforces a completely different concept of academic ethics: honest performance on the exam and teacher bias-free evaluation. Some respondents expressed concern that as a culturally foreign form of testing, UNT is likely to face resistance from various interested parties involved. Overall, most respondents agreed that the impersonalized and computerized format of the exam limits opportunities for malpractice at entrance exams on the part of both students and examiners and helps combat corrupt practices in education.

#### **“Modern” vs. “traditional” dichotomy**

Discourse analysis of the respondents' narratives leads to a number of observations with regard to possible socio-cultural patterns of perception among those for and against the exam. As discussed above, traditional oral exams preferred by the UNT opponents are perceived as allowing for student creativity and full realization of their academic potential, while the new written exam is seen as limiting students talents and capacities as well as giving way to guesswork and encouraging cramming and mechanistic application of formal rules. UNT is repeatedly referred to by the opponents as “unreliable”, “unobjective”, “obscure” and “foreign”, while traditional exams are believed to represent the opposite qualities. In discussion of UNT's disadvantages, much of the opponents' narrative appears to be constructed within classical binary oppositions of “traditional vs. modern” that are further developed within “old vs. new”, “creative vs. formalistic”, and “ours vs. theirs” dichotomies. Within those dichotomies, the “old”, “traditional” and “authentic” is associated with thoroughness, trustworthiness and good quality, while the “new” and “modern” is linked with superficiality, mechanicism and unreliability. The “new/modern vs. old/traditional” opposition is further conceptualized through the prism of “Russian vs. Western” and “authentic vs. borrowed” divides. The new exam is perceived as a foreign element in the system of education, “forced” (Respondent 1) on the local education system from the outside in the “pursuit of time” (Respondent 4) and as “a courtesy and reverence to the western education” (Respondent 2).

This pattern is best illustrated by the opponent's discussion of the new grading system (0-100) in comparison with the traditional one (3-5). Despite the almost universal agreement among educators and the public on the traditional three-point system of assessment being

inefficient, incomplete and virtually obsolete, all UNT opponents expressed preference for the old system as being more objective and more transparent:

“The UNT scores are very confusing. One student gets accepted and the other one doesn’t, it’s always a shame. Within the old system, there is more room for flexibility, it’s always clear what “5” or “4” stands for”.  
(Respondent 1)

Although all UNT opponents expressed preference for the old grading scale, when prompted, none were able to support their opinion with clear arguments and elaborate in what way the traditional grading system is more transparent than the new 100-point scale. UNT opponents sometimes referred to the genre of composition as obsolete or archaic but nevertheless insisted on it being a better testing form than UNT’s essay:

“Although written composition is an obsolete genre, it is still more appropriate for testing”. (Respondent 2)

In the narrative of UNT opponents, the past appears to be ultimately superior to the present. In discussing student quality, all UNT opponents claim that in the past, the students used to be better educated and better prepared for the course of study, make fewer language mistakes at oral and written exams, and cheat on the exams less. Respondents’ use of language indicates that they hold UNT responsible for the deterioration of educational standards in general. They appear to view the relation between the decline in literacy skills and the introduction of UNT as linear and consequential, the former being the cause and the latter the effect:

“[University freshmen come unprepared for the course of study] Of course by the 5<sup>th</sup> year they catch up. But the root of the problem is UNT.”  
(Respondent 4)

“As a result [of UNT] the general level of literacy has gone downhill.”  
(Respondent 5)

“Now we are observing the full range of speech mistakes. (...) This is all the fault of UNT - students don’t read, don’t speak.” (Respondent 1)

To illustrate their point, opponents tend to use anecdotal evidence and examples from their teaching experiences. Unlike UNT proponents, none of those against UNT have referred to or indicated familiarity with existing research on correlation between UNT scores and other parameters of student performance. Moreover, some UNT opponents associated poor student performance manifested through UNT with deterioration of reading and writing skills not only among the students but also among the general public:

“Look around – there are so many misspellings in the outdoor advertising slogans. For months you could see “uchastvovat” [to participate] spelled with “v” on the advertising banner in front of the university – it’s a result of that very attitude to reading and writing [that UNT promotes]”.  
(Respondent 5)

When linking deteriorated literacy among the population with poor student performance on UNT in their narrative, most UNT opponents do not seem to consider a reverse cause and effect correlation: deterioration of the literacy level among the general population leads to poorer student achievements, including lower UNT scores. In the eyes of UNT opponents, the educational crisis experienced by the modern society is unequivocally a result of UNT. The “new/modern” vs. “old/traditional” dichotomy emerging from the opponent’s narratives appears to play a role in shaping the opponents’ perception of UNT and cause them to disregard multiple positive aspects of the exam emphasized by their UNT-supporting colleagues.

### **Clash of writing traditions**

In discussion of a major point of controversy between UNT opponents and proponents: the school composition vs. short written assignment in part C, opponents’ narrative reveals an intrinsic conflict between Russian and western writing traditions. The Russian academic writing tradition is based on longer, comprehensive, written texts, often discussing moral and philosophical issues. The Russian school of teaching writing emphasizes detailed expression of one’s opinion on a matter in a free form with few limitations imposed on the author in terms of structure and length, with the main criteria for assessment being originality of ideas, quality of content and use of rhetorical devices. Adopted from the Western testing models, UNT type questions seem to be based on a different tradition of teaching and testing writing skills. UNT is function-oriented and requires students to express their opinion on and critically analyze real-world every day life situations. It implies considerable formal restrictions in terms of length and structure. Besides testing writing skills, it also tests certain reading skills, such as the students’ ability to identify the main idea of a text written by someone else.

All UNT supporters saw short essays in exam’s part C as useful and practical “small everyday life” genres. Some of those in favour of the new exam showed awareness of the culturally-determined differences in writing traditions implied in the old and the new testing systems and were able to critically assess drawbacks and advantages of both. None of the UNT opponents, however, expressed appreciation of the skills tested in UNT’s written section. All opponents referred to the 150 word limitation on the written section as pedagogically inappropriate and demotivating for test-takers. For UNT opponents, Part C is “a pathetic withered tree leaf” (Respondent 2) devoid of tissue and substance. Multiple choice questions used instead of traditional open-ended answers are also perceived as hostile to the Russian pedagogical tradition. In the eyes of UNT opponents, multiple choice approach compromises the very validity of the test. As stated

by Respondent 2, “only an idiot won’t be able to guess on multiple choice questions”. The clash of different traditions of academic writing as well as different pedagogical traditions imbedded in the two testing systems may partially account for the strong resentment some interviewees showed towards the new examination.

### **Conclusion**

UNT proponents and opponents interviewed within this study problematize the same issues: reliability of UNT as an assessment tool and its role in re-shaping school curriculum, improving university admission procedure, eliminating regional disparities, and combating malpractice in entrance exams. However, perception of UNT by opponents and proponents with regard to these issues differ dramatically. Exam features appreciated by the proponents are considered weaknesses by the opponents; while the limitations of the exam emphasized by the opponents are viewed as strengths by the proponents.

While supporters argue that UNT is an objective, reliable and comprehensive system of testing, exam opponents criticize it as a subjective and incomplete testing mechanism that produces random results. Proponents believe that the new system fosters creativity and individuality, whilst opponents argue that the format of the exam encourages cramming and guessing. Proponents think that the introduction of the exam into the system of education has brought to light serious problems of contemporary Russian school: outdated curriculum, teacher-centred methods of instruction, widespread student cheating and teacher bias. Contrary to the proponent’s opinion, opponents claim that the introduction of UNT has created rather than uncovered these problems.

Both sides agree that over the past several years UNT has been playing an important role in re-shaping school curriculum. Supporters of the exam argue that, as a result of this influence, school curricula have been modernized to meet individual needs of contemporary students. In the opponents’ view, UNT has had a detrimental effect on the school curriculum by skewing it towards cramming for UNT during classroom hours. UNT proponents believe that by introducing formal grading criteria, the new test factors out assessor subjectivity in entrance exams, objectifies the admission process and helps level off educational opportunities for applicants of various socio-economic backgrounds. Critics of the test argue that due to the imperfections in the test content and administration, UNT randomizes university admission and deprives admission committee of an opportunity to select most talented applicants at traditional oral examination, allowing poorly-prepared applicants to gain university admission by chance.

UNT proponents tend to consider strengths and weaknesses of the new exam in the context of educational and socio-economic challenges of the past two decades. In their assessment of advantages and drawbacks of UNT, proponents discuss the role of UNT in putting school education under state and public control, introducing market forces into higher education, and modernizing curricula to make it serve the needs of contemporary

students. Opponents tend to appraise UNT in comparison with the traditional system of examinations. In their narrative, the traditional system of exams appears superior and possesses timeless value.

Further research into whether and in what way individual faculty members' perceptions of the reform influence their professional behavior and their practices as admission committee members, private tutors and university instructors could contribute to our understanding of the factors that foster or hamper current educational reforms in Russian higher education at the regional level and provide policy-makers with tools for developing informed region-tailored policies.

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