

# TEST PREPARATION RESEARCH



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## HIGH-STAKES TESTING IN RUSSIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND PERSPECTIVE

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### Historical Overview

Educational assessment in Russia has had an inconsistent history profoundly influenced by political shifts in government. In the end of the 19th century, there was a strong culture of testing in the Russian Empire with oral and written tests used for university admissions and high school exit purposes. After bolshevists' revolution in 1917, achievement grades and examinations were cancelled because they were seen as capitalistic and imperialistic tools promoting social inequality. In the early 1920s, the young Soviet Union government realized the value of assessment for student learning and reinstated testing programs across the educational systems. However, Stalin's regime proclaimed educational assessment as "pseudo-scientific" and "bourgeois and deleterious" (Учебное пособие, 2009), largely because Stalin's political opponents supported such research. The scholars involved in educational assessment research were persecuted along with the political opponents of Stalin. The more than 300 researchers in social science research were subjects to repression and political oppression, among them were Vygotsky's students, left the Moscow State University for Kharkov (Ukraine) to

escape persecution. Totalitarianism in politics greatly influenced scholarly educational research thereby hampering the development of any quality standardized instruments, including language tests. The negative attitude towards testing made research and publications in this area unattainable until the late 1980s.

After the communist regime collapsed in 1991, the Russian scholars soon realized that the international testing community had made considerable advancement in terms of practical applications of tests, publications, financial support, training, technologies, and improvements to overall quality. Meanwhile, the tests being used in Russia at that time, including federal school examination papers, were of very low quality with major threats to validity and low reliability. An exception could be made for tests that were developed for research purposes by university departments, but these did not seem to play any sizable role in educational development (Bakker, 1999). Two decades after the fall of the communist regime, educational assessment research and the implementation of tests has changed dramatically. High-stakes tests and test preparation have become a common practice in

## UPDATES

- **Case Studies are underway in Brisbane, Australia and Tehran, Iran.**
- **Jia Ma received funding from the 2012 Pearson External Research Programme to support her project.**

educational and professional sectors as a way of life similar to other post-soviet countries (Bethell, & Zabulionis, 2012). The Unified State Examination is one example of a high-stakes test used in present-day Russia.

**The Unified State Examination (USE)** - is a large-scale testing program implemented in 2009 as a high-school exit examination and for entrance into university. In order to graduate from high school, students need to pass two compulsory USE exams – Russian Language and Mathematics. All other USE exams (e.g., English, Geography, History) are optional for students, and they are allowed to take as many as they want or need for admission to university (Bethell, & Zabulionis, 2012). The USE was introduced in order to eliminate corruption. Due to the high-stakes, parents and students are under a lot of pressure to ensure the students successfully pass. Some may prepare for the USE on their own, while others will hire private tutors or attend test preparation courses (Bethell, & Zabulionis, 2012). Test preparation classes and privately paid tutors are appearing everywhere across the country as a common educational activity (Tavokin, 2009). Avanesov (2006) insisted that the USE is a government-sponsored gate-keeping mechanism designed to limit educational opportunities to its citizens since only the rich can afford private tutoring or test preparation courses to help prepare for the high-stakes test. Moreover, the USE cutoff score for a given university can be easily manipulated to maximize the number of students required to pay tuition to that university. This practice reduces the number of citizens who can attend a university. All state universities across Russia still offer free post secondary education under the constitution, but there is a quota for the ‘commercial’ students, who pay their tuition because they did not obtain high enough entrance examinations’ marks to be admitted for free education (Avanesov, 2006).

## Conclusion

Russia’s history with educational assessment, including language tests, has been turbulent marked by major changes in government. Since the communists’ regime collapsed in 1991, high-stakes testing was introduced, and in the last decade materialized as the Unified State Examination. There are many political, financial and social obstacles in the design, application and interpretations of the USE, which have led to heated public discussions about their use in mass media and government. Concerns about the transparency of the scoring and access to test data by researchers call into question the quality of the USE. Hopefully with time, the quality of high-stake tests will continue to improve. More studies are needed that focus on appropriate test preparation practices for high-stakes tests in Russia. The fluctuating history of test use in the former Soviet Union combined with the vast landscape and unique culture make for an interesting research context that will likely reveal processes not present or visible in other contexts.

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