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Abstract

Purpose – Although the number of higher education institutes in Iran has been increased and the capacity of many universities has been expanded by the government and private sector, the tough competition among senior high school graduates is still a major concern. Authorities have been contemplating other ways to alleviate the discontent of applicants who seek access to free of charge public universities. The Cumulative Grade-Point Average (CGPA) of senior high school level has recently been proposed by educational authorities as the most effective substitute for measuring students' academic performances to enter universities. The purpose of this paper is explore the pros and cons of this proposal by interviewing ten purposively selected stakeholders.

Design/methodology/approach – In total, ten purposively selected stakeholders were interviewed.

Findings – Out of ten informants, six of them supported the modification of the University Entrance Exam (UEE), three supported its abolition, and one supported its continuation and repetition two or three times a year.

Research limitations/implications – Since any innovation or reform in the exam will affect other components in the whole education system, the informants emphasized that it should be done incrementally. The findings of this study contribute to improving the knowledge of the UEE reform options.

Originality/value – Over the last few decades, there have been waves of assessment reforms around the world. This paper offers an update of the assessment reform in Iran, which adds information to current literature.

Keywords Iran, Universities, Examinations, University entrance exam, Cumulative grade point average, Higher education, Senior high school

Paper type Research paper

Background

Based on the Article 30 of Iran's Constitution, the government is obliged to provide all citizens with free education up to the end of middle school and expand free higher education to the extent required by the country for attaining self-sufficiency. Although the Iranian government has increased and expanded higher education institutions since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, it has not yet been able to meet the needs of a large number of applicants who are eager to enter free of charge public universities and institutes. That is why admission to higher education institutions is done through a tough nation-wide entrance examination in which only the most talented and studious students can manage.

Education is generally free of charge although there are some private schools, institutes, and universities that are permitted to charge tuition fees. On the whole, the Iranian educational system consists of the following categories:

(1) five-year primary school from the age of six (compulsory education);

(2) three-year junior high school from the age of 11 (compulsory education);

(3) three-year senior high school from the age of 14;

(4) one-year pre-university education from the age of 17 to 18; and

(5) university, which is under the supervision of the Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education (MHTME) and Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT).

As of September 20, 2012, the $6 + 3 + 3$ educational system will be implemented which means six-year primary school, three-year junior high school, and three-year senior high school.

Third-grade junior high school students had to pass an examination at the provincial level in order to enter senior high schools. This rule has recently changed. Third-grade senior high school students have to pass an examination at the provincial or national level in order to enter the pre-university centers. Pre-university education includes a one-year program for 17-18-year-old students who have to pass different courses before entering universities. At the end of this one-year pre-university course, students obtain a pre-university certificate which qualifies them to sit for the highly competitive nation-wide university entrance exam (UEE). Followed by pre-university education is four- to seven-year university. The last level is graduate schools, which consists of a master and doctoral program.

The Ministry of Education (ME) is responsible for formulating education policy, as well as for overseeing the operations of all public and private schools, MSRT is responsible for non-medical universities, and MHTME is responsible for medical universities. Schools, some teacher training colleges, and technical institutes are under the supervision of the ME, which employs the highest number of civil servants.

Due to limited space and resources, the stringent, centralized, and nation-wide UEE in Iran has led to the discontent of applicants who seek access to free of charge public universities at the tertiary level. Parents spend a lot of time and money outside the educational system to help their children succeed in the UEE. That is why the Iranian MSRT is going to abolish the UEE in the near future. This plan has been on the parliament's agenda for many years. Based on the plan, admission into higher education institutes will be determined by the students' educational records at national exams. These all-inclusive exams will be organized and held by the ME during senior high school years. Since the school exams are not standardized, admittance of students based on the current high school scores is not possible. If the plan is implemented, the ME will have to develop reliable and valid tests as well as a standardized scoring system for the high school level.

The UEE problem in pre-revolutionary Iran was that candidates from rural, suburban, and urban areas competed without any quota. Naturally, most of university entrants were from urban areas because of their better education. In post-revolutionary Iran (after 1979), the Education Evaluation Organization (EEO) was established by the MSRT to oversee all aspects of the UEE. The UEE shifted from a mere achievement test to an instrument to Islamize universities by admitting candidates who were academically acceptable and politically loyal to the newly elected government. Since then the UEE has gone through many reforms. A quota system has been introduced to help underprivileged students in rural and suburban areas so that they can compete with students in urban areas. Handicapped and volunteer veterans had their own specific quota after the Iran-Iraq war. A priority is given to candidates who prefer to study in their provincial universities. Despite reforms made in recent years to equalize educational opportunities, the UEE is still considered to be far from fair.

According to Farhadi *et al.* (2010), due to the Iran-Iraq war, Iran could not seriously reform education in the early post-revolution years. The quota system has turned out

to be an impediment to equal access to higher education institutes. Candidates whose academic performances are better than those favored by the quota system cannot take a seat at universities. The nature of the memory-based UEE itself is the other ongoing problem that has not only turned high schools into factories for exam cramming but also led to a very lucrative cram industry outside the educational system. As the UEE crisis persists, authorities are contemplating other approaches to alleviate or remedy it. The CGPA of senior high school has recently been proposed by educational authorities as the most effective option for measuring students' academic performances to enter universities. This study investigates the pros and cons of this proposal by interviewing all stakeholders.

Review of literature

The UEE is called Konkur in Iran. It is probably the changed form of the term "concour," which refers to the process of sourcing, screening, and selecting people for different purposes. According to Kamyab (2008), it is a comprehensive multiple-choice exam, which covers all subjects taught in Iranian high schools ranging from math and science to theology, and foreign languages. Students usually spend a year preparing for this stringent exam. If they fail, they will be allowed to repeat it in the following years many times until they pass it. A very lucrative cram industry operating all over the country privately attracts so many enthusiastic students by offering preparatory courses.

According to Cheng (2005), examinations have been used as a means of control and as a way to counter nepotism and favoritism in the allocation of scarce opportunities. They have also been used to encourage the development of talent, upgrade the school performance, and select for education and employment for many years. However, Kamyab (2008) argues that the UEE is a high-stakes test in which many students become disappointed. Students' failure to enter higher education institutes has led to undesirable outcomes such as anxiety, boredom, hopelessness of those who fail the test, dropping out of studies or brain drain, and thus loss of a great portion of the county's potential. The UEE is still an impediment to equal education access because of the quota criteria.

Although the number of the country's higher education institutes has been increased and the capacity of many universities has been expanded by the government and private sector, the fierce and tough competition among pre-university and high school graduates is still a major concern in the society. According to Kamyab (2008), the phenomenon of the stringent, centralized nationwide UEE in Iran has caused discontent because it is the sole criterion for the selection of enthusiastic applicants seeking access to one of the public universities. The high-stakes UEE is usually preceded by costly preparatory courses in which students learn test-taking strategies and are given a lot of mock test items. Approximately one month after the UEE is held, participants receive a score sheet along with a booklet, which shows available fields of study in different universities together with their capacity for that educational year. About half of those who have scored high will be eligible to fill out a priority indication form and declare their preferred fields of study.

The EEO processes the priority indication forms based on the participants' total score in the UEE, their field of study priority list, and some other selection rules such as regional quota and student's diploma average score. Only about one-third of the participants who are eligible to fill out a priority indication form will be finally admitted to the higher education institutes. One of the main criticisms regarding the

UEE is that it is a very limited way of evaluating the caliber of pre-university and high school graduates who wish to gain a place at university. In such a situation, doing anything out of interest which is unlikely to be tested in the exam is assumed to be a waste of time. Iranian students' high ranking in such exams is a magic key to their future success (Hosseini, 2007).

Since program-level (admissions and placement) decisions and classroom-level decisions are two entirely different categories of testing, a distinction should be made between two different assessment instruments: norm-referenced testing (NRT) and criterion-referenced testing (CRT). According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), NRT refers to "a test that measures how the performance of a particular test taker or group of test takers compares with the performance of another test taker or group of test takers whose scores are given as a norm" (p. 363). It is used to classify students by percentile for measuring proficiency for admissions into or placement within a program. Therefore, a test taker score is interpreted with reference to the scores of other test takers. CRT refers to "a test that measures a test taker's performance according to a particular standard or criterion that has been agreed upon. The test taker must reach this level of performance to pass the test, and a test taker's score is interpreted with reference to the criterion score" (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, p. 132). It is an achievement or diagnostic test that is used for motivating students. It helps teachers to assess the strengths and weaknesses of individual students with regard to their achievement of the pre-specific and taught material. So, all students may obtain a perfect score, or conversely, fail the test.

In Iran, admissions decisions are made based on students' performance on the UEE in which they are ideally spread out in a continuum for which the adoption of a standardized NRT is greatly needed. The current UEE is an amalgamation of NRT and CRT. It is a NRT in the sense that each test taker score is interpreted with reference to the scores of other test takers and it is a CRT in the sense that it measures students' mastery of the pre-specific and taught material. It is an embodiment of norm-referenced achievement test. The following quotation from Davies (1968, p. 7) suggests that using achievement tests for predictive purposes is inevitable but unreliable:

> The use of achievement tests is to find out how much has been learnt. They are concerned, therefore, entirely with the past though they often are used for predictive purposes. That they should be used predictively, i.e. to make claims about future performance, is probably inevitable though it is not the function of an achievement test to predict.

According to Chapman and Snyder (2000), high-stakes tests will have a great influence on teaching and learning if their "primary use is to ration future opportunity as the basis for determining admission to the next layer of education or to employment opportunities" (p. 458). Wiseman (1961) argues that these tests persuade teachers to cover their subjects fully and finish them in due course. They also encourage teachers to be more attentive to weak students and become familiar with the achievements of other colleagues and schools. According to Herman and Golan (1991), these tests determine the required standards to be met by teachers, students, and schools. They also boost classroom instruction through feedback and promote accountability of schools and teachers. Furthermore, they enhance fast and broad changes within schools and encourage major educational reform if coupled with incentives and sanctions. For example, Iranian English teachers have a high commitment in covering the subjects and are accountable for students' performance in tests which has led to teaching toward the test.

Impact is a general term at the macrolevel that refers to any of the effects that a test may have on individual test takers, teachers, parents, school administrators, test developers, educational systems, or society as a whole. However, washback is a specific term at the microlevel which usually refers to the positive or negative effect of a test on classroom teaching or learning (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). According to Andrews (1994), backwash is the term used to describe the testing impact in general education literature, while washback seems to be preferred in language education.

Theories related to the study
Generally, three main interrelated theories (innovation, impact, and washback in applied linguistics and language studies or backwash in general education) were involved in this study. Innovation theory (Henrichsen, 1989) from which the conceptual framework for the impact studies began and washback theory (Hamp-Lyons, 1999; Alderson and Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Alderson and Wall, 1993); propose that test-related effects may occur at different points in time, even before a new formal test is introduced.

In his hybrid model of the diffusion, Henrichsen (1989) divided the process of innovation into three main stages. The first stage is antecedent, which refers to the circumstances of the educational context before the introduction of an innovation. The second stage is process, which refers to the facilitating and impeding factors that impose an effect while the innovation is being put into effect. And the third stage is consequence (impact), which refers to the possible impacts or outcomes of the interaction between the antecedent and the process stages. Based on this theory, the impact of a test is determined by a combination of interrelated factors surrounding it, not by the test alone.

The third stage in Henrichsen's (1989) hybrid model of the diffusion is the impact of the interaction between the antecedents and the process stages. The impact theory tries to study the interaction and the relationship between a test and educational system or the society in which it is used at the macro level (Wall, 1996, 1998; Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

The term "impact" generally refers to the consequences of testing beyond the classroom (Bachman and Palmer, 1996). Washback is only one dimension of impact which affects the educational context (Hamp-Lyons, 1997). According to Wall and Horák (2006), the impact of the high-stakes tests on teaching and learning has long been accepted and discussed in the general education literature but the 1990s was the first time that it attracted the attention of language educators. The inclusion of impact in Bachman and Palmer's notion of usefulness (1996) enhanced the importance of studying washback. Washback theory was developed into 15 hypotheses by Alderson and Wall (1993, pp. 120-1) as delineated below:

(1) a test will influence teaching;

(2) a test will influence learning;

(3) a test will influence what teachers teach;

(4) a test will influence how teachers teach;

(5) a test will influence what learners learn;

(6) a test will influence how learners learn;

(7) a test will influence the rate and sequence of teaching;

(8) a test will influence the rate and sequence of learning;

(9) a test will influence the degree and depth of teaching;

(10) a test will influence the degree and depth of learning;

(11) a test will influence attitudes toward the content, method, etc., of teaching and learning;

(12) tests that have important consequences will have washback; conversely

(13) tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback;

(14) tests will have washback on all learners and teachers; and

(15) tests will have washback effects for some learners and some teachers, but not for others.

Conceptual framework
In the literature, the effect of testing on teaching and learning is commonly referred to as washback. Some research has already been done about this phenomenon based on which the following conceptual framework was established. In order to investigate the backwash impact, it is necessary to focus on the people who participate in the educational process, on what happens in the classroom, and on the outcomes. In addition, the backwash effect is mediated by a number of factors which may be a little different from context to context (Figure 1).

While some researchers believe that nation-wide and high-stakes tests are useful for education in desirable ways, others have questioned their validity and concluded that
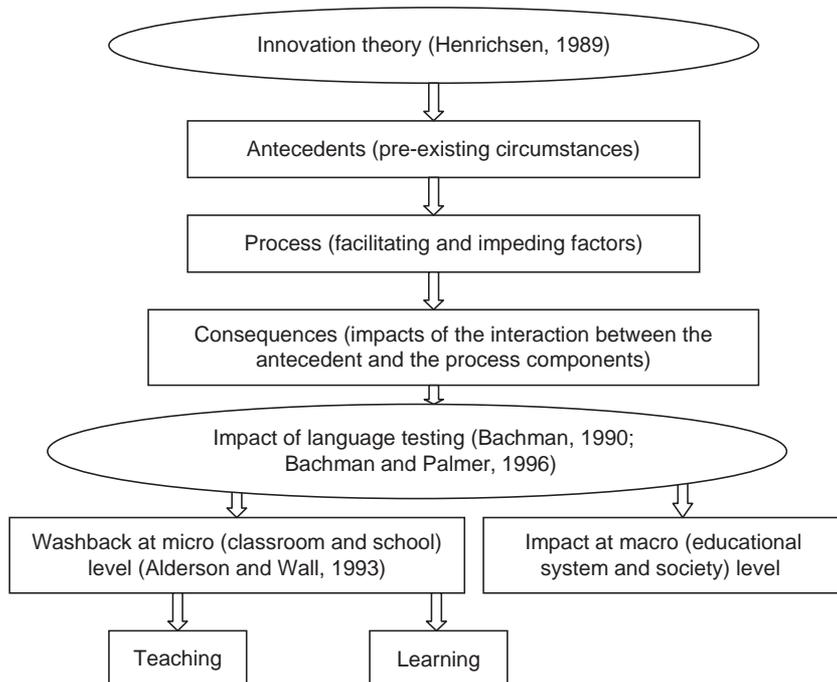

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework based on the washback theory

their effect on language education is undesirable. For example, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), Noble and Smith (1994a, b), Smith (1991), Smith *et al.* (1994), and Romberg *et al.* (1989) assert that mandated and centralized testing negatively influences teachers' work and activities. The reported disadvantages of large-scale and high-stakes testing are problems such as fostering of anxiety, fear, and shame. They narrow the curriculum and instruction and lead to loss of instructional time due to test preparation activities. They are not valid and adequate to measure students' achievements for admission purposes. According to Wiseman (1961), the undesirable impact of high-stakes tests on teachers is that they persuade teachers to focus on activities which are more likely to turn up in the exam and neglect the rest. They restrict teachers' latitude and urge them to do the students' work. They also stimulate teachers to put more emphasis on the skills, which help the students improve their performance in the exam.

Prodromou (1995, p. 15) refers to the negative and undesirable effect of tests when he states "teaching a textbook as if it were a test book." Madaus (1988, p. 83) stated that "it is testing, not the officially stated curriculum that is increasingly determining what is taught, how it is taught, what is learned, and how it is learned." Latham (1877, p. 1, as cited in Cheng, 2005) characterized centralized examinations as "an encroaching power" that limited students' learning through making them prepare for their exam by studying with crammers and in cramming schools. Since such examinations usually restrict curricula, teachers, students, school principals, and even parents, they are assumed to have undesirable effects.

According to Eckstein and Noah (1993), this pervasive power influences the functions of educational systems. Oxenham (1984) pointed out that nation-wide exams caused the most boring and tedious kinds of teaching and learning. Noble and Smith (1994a) pointed out that "high-stakes testing affected teachers directly and negatively" (p. 3). "Teaching test-taking strategies and drilling on multiple-choice worksheets is likely to boost the scores but unlikely to promote general understanding" (Noble and Smith, 1994b, p. 6). According to Hosseini (2007), entrance into Iranian tuition-free public universities is very competitive and difficult. He argues that the present individualistic competition has made teaching subordinated to testing. Finally, according to Kamyab (2008), the Iranian UEE has led to a very lucrative cram industry which offers the exam-oriented courses to enthusiastic students. Due to the UEE nature, Iranian schools have changed into exam cramming factories. It has not only caused massive brain drain but also psychological and social problems among the youth who fail the test.

This has made Iranian authorities consider using other ways of solving the problem. They have recently proposed the CGPA of high school to replace the UEE. This plan will take effect in the near future when the ME develops reliable and valid tests as well as a standardized scoring system for high school at the national level. To examine its practicality, this study investigated the pros and cons of the proposal by interviewing all stakeholders including high school teachers and students, state-governed university professors, and students as well as high school and university authorities. The interviewees answered the following single question.

What are the pros and cons of relying on senior high school CGPA instead of the UEE for measuring students' qualifications to enter state universities?

Method
Qualitative interviewing is a process in which an interviewer attempts to find out what others feel and think about their worlds. The interviewer needs to be both a good

conversationalist and a good listener (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). As Patton (1990, p. 278) pointed out, the only aim of a qualitative interview is "to access the perspective of the person being interviewed." The following general question was asked from ten informants in Khorasane Shomali province to gather the qualitative data.

What are the pros and cons of relying on high school CGPA instead of the UEE for measuring students' qualifications (academic performances) to enter state universities?

Morgan and Krueger (1998) suggested the following guidelines, which were used in this study, for reporting the results:

(1) report the number of participants;

(2) present the key themes in the data;

(3) use direct quotations to illustrate the main views which were identified during the data analysis; and

(4) do not report the percentage of participants who gave one answer or another because the aim of interview is to reach different viewpoints about the topic which is under investigation.

After purposive selection of ten male interviewees (see Table I) from the north east of the country (Khorasane Shomali Province), they were asked the same research question. Although how to pose a question is important, a researcher needs to take some other strategies and actions during an interview to encourage interviewees for more participation. Depending on the interviewee's perspective, this single but general question was followed by more probing questions concerning final term exam format, textbooks, time constraint, syllabus design, choice of teaching materials other than textbooks, time arrangement in classroom activities, the content teachers would teach and the way they would assess their students, stress from school principals, and students' learning attitudes. The interviewer was the researcher himself who has been teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at high school and university levels for more than 20 years. Each interview lasted for about half an hour and took place at the interviewee's work place.

The informants were assured that their participation in the research was confidential and only the researcher would have access to their identity. Since there was no formal structured instrument, the researcher was free to move the unstructured interview in any direction that came up. The entire interview was jotted down first. This provided a complete record of the discussion and facilitated analysis of the data. Then the content of the discussion was analyzed to look for trends and patterns that reappeared in it. The results were compared and contrasted. The emerging themes

Characteristics	Number
State university professors	2
State university students	2
High school teachers	2
High school students	2
Academic deputy chancellor in a state university	1
High school principal	1
Total	10

Table I.
Demographic characteristics of the interviewees

were highlighted. The findings were described and important quotes were used to illustrate them. Finally, the report was revised and finalized.

The number of the interviewees has been presented under the demographics of participants followed by their profiles. Then, the emerged key themes in the data are reported along with direct quotations to illustrate their main viewpoints. Table I presents the descriptive data related to the interviewees' characteristics.

The profile of each interviewee is given below in detail using pseudo initials to be ethical and maintain their privacy and confidentiality (Creswell, 2005):

(1) O.R.D. is an assistant professor at a state university with a PhD degree in mathematics. He has been teaching mathematics for five years.

(2) D.B. is lecturer at a state university with an MA degree in accounting. He has taught accounting for three years.

(3) M.B. is a senior high school teacher with a BA degree in language teaching and an MA in educational administration. He has got a work experience of 21 years.

(4) R.J. is a senior high school teacher with a BS degree in physics He has got a work experience of 19 years.

(5) M.T. is an undergraduate student studying accounting.

(6) M.E. is an undergraduate student studying civil engineering.

(7) R.G. is senior high school student studying mathematics.

(8) A.A. is senior high school student studying science.

(9) A.A.S. is an assistant professor and the academic deputy chancellor at a state university with a PhD degree in counseling. He has taught counseling for 13 years and has been the academic deputy chancellor for five years.

(10) E.R. is a senior high school principal with a BS degree in biology He has got a work experience of 23 years.

Results

The researcher followed Creswell's (2005) recommendation to organize, analyze, and explore the data by hand. He suggests the hand analysis of qualitative data when analyzing a small database (<500 pages of transcript or field notes). After exploring the data, they were coded to form broad themes. Then, they were narrowed into smaller, more manageable number of themes in an inductive process. The result is summarized in the following table. Table II presents the main themes which the interviewees mentioned in their interview. They are reported as follows.

Themes	Frequency
The UEE modification	6
The UEE abolition	3
The UEE continuation and repetition	1

Table II.
Main themes

The UEE modification
Six participants supported the UEE modification rather than its abolition. The following quotation from one of the interviewees (A.A.S.) reflects his suggestions about the UEE abolition suggestion:

> The UEE alone is not enough to be used for decision-making about the future of millions of Iranian students. It is held only once a year. If an applicant should be sick or have other physical and emotional problems on the exam day, he/she would have to wait for one more year to sit for another exam. It is a stressful experience which makes applicants anxious. High school students' acceptance or rejection depends on their 3 h exam performance. I think instead of abolishing the UEE, we need to give it less weight. My suggestion is to hold a national comprehensive achievement exam at the end of the 3 year junior high school and record it in the student's report card. Then, it is necessary to hold and score the 3 year senior high school exams at the national level so that we can get 3 reliable averages. After that, we can hold the UEE at the end of the 3 year senior high school. Finally, we will get 5 scores, that is, the score from the national achievement exam at the end of the junior high school, 3 CGPA scores from the 3 years of senior high school, and the score from the UEE which is a comprehensive achievement and competition test based on the content of all subjects in the senior high school cycle. Therefore, we will have five scores. They can be added and divided by five to get the final score which will be compared to the other applicants' score so that each individual rank is determined.

Another interviewee (M.B.) opposed the total abolition of the UEE. He suggested equal weights for the senior high school CGPA and the UEE score. He argued:

> The UEE is costly not only for the government but also for the families. Since it affects their children's career and future life, parents spend quite a lot of money on the UEE preparatory evening classes outside the educational systems. I have been in the ME for more than 20 years and I know that this ministry is well able to standardize the senior high school tests. Even now the third year subjects in senior high schools are tested and scored nationally and the student's gained CGPA has a weight of 15% for the university admission. If the CGPA of the 3 years is included, the weight of 50% for the CGPA and 50% for the UEE score will strike a balance between the two options. It is costly but fair for decision making.

Also, the following quotation from one of the other informants (E.R.) indicates his perspective in support of the UEE modification:

> I disagree with the abolition of the UEE. It has been used as a reliable test for years. The UEE result shows that the most brilliant students are admitted to the best universities and fields of study. I am informed that the weight of CGPA for the next year exam is 25%. As a principal I would be happy to see that the educational authorities are making reforms incrementally. In sum, I suggest a 50% to 50% weight for the senior high school CGPA and the UEE score.

The UEE abolition
Three out of ten interviewees mentioned the complete eradication of the UEE. All of them emphasized that CGPA is valid and reliable only if the senior high school exams are standardized and scored by scoring machines. One of them (D.B.) stated:

> The replacement of the UEE by the students' CGPA of senior high school is a very good idea because it will reduce the students' stress and anxiety. The problem is that the current scoring system by the ME is not reliable. The authorities are planning to standardize and hold the senior high school exams at the national level. This means that students' achievement will be evaluated based on their performance on multiple-choice tests scored by scoring machines. It goes without saying that this change will affect teachers' teaching methodology and students' attitudes. Anyway, university admission based on the CGPA is much better than the UEE

provided that a strict program is used to safe guard the answer sheets and the exam environments against cheating.

Also, the following quotation from another interviewee (O.R.D.) indicates his point of view about the UEE abolition suggestion:

> I think it is justifiable to scrap the UEE if the 3 year senior high school exams are standardized and held in a centralized manner at the national level. The UEE is held once a year to measure the students' caliber. It is not fair to judge their qualifications based on the sole results of the UEE. But if the student's CGPA of 3 years is combined and compared to his/her rivals for university admission, it will improve the quality of education at high schools and universities. The exam results of senior high schools would be more reliable. Educational authorities would be able to follow the realization of the objectives. Students and teachers would be accountable for their performances. Discrimination would reduce at the school level because the exam papers will be marked confidentially by the machine.

The UEE continuation and repetition

Only one of the interviewees (H.R.) suggested the current UEE be repeated two or three times. He explained his suggestion as follows:

> You know that the UEE on its own is not the main problem because it is held under strict supervision of the EEO. Actually most teachers, students, and parents trust it. But I believe that it is a high stakes test because it is held only once a year. My suggestion is to hold it at least 2 or 3 times a year to reduce the applicant's anxiety. I know that the senior high school CGPA is an excellent substitute for the UEE score but it is not cost-effective and practical to hold national exams for all the senior high school subjects. Anyway, if the authorities can guarantee the validity of the tests, the reliability of scores, and the practicality of the procedure, CGPA is the best option.

Discussions

As the results suggest, the majority of the informants in this study expect the testing authorities to reform the UEE rather than abolish it. But as Henrichsen (1989, p. 179) points out, "proposing that the examinations be changed is easy, and many have done it." However, "overcoming the barriers to change and actually modifying the exams is a far more difficult task." To generate needed support for strengthening and reforming assessment so that it can play a more productive role in education improvement, the first step is to cultivate among all stakeholders (policy makers, principals, teachers, and parents) a deeper appreciation of the power and cost-effectiveness of assessment.

A few informants referred to the effects of any new changes in university admission policy on classroom activities. The UEE has had detrimental effects on teaching because learning follows testing in focussing on aspects that are easy to test. Creative and innovative methods are harder for teachers to include in classroom practice. These trends reward only those students who work in the narrowly constrained ways that lead to test success. According to Hughes (1989), positive impact should be the first priority of tests. He argues that the cost of fostering positive impact and not achieving it should be weighed up against each other before making any decision. Most of the interviewees believed that the impact of senior high school CGPA on teaching and learning would be positive. It is essential, then, to keep track of future changes in the UEE and of the ways in which schools and teachers react to them, for which more observational and longitudinal studies will be required.

One of the implications of this study is that the introduction of any kinds of reform without familiarizing the affected teachers with the new approach will not necessarily guarantee any positive change in teachers' teaching methods (Hughes, 1989). To bring

about a positive effect, all levels the education system (decision making, intervening, and implementing) should be involved. As Cheng (2005) stated "only when all these organizations (participants) work together can substantial change in teaching and learning eventually be realized" (p. 246).

Another implication is that alternative assessments such as CGPA have some shortcomings. One of the main limitations of them is that they are limited to the classroom and seem to be difficult for nationwide use. According to Arshad (2004), alternative assessments have been suggested because of a growing concern about the ability of traditional assessments to accurately measure some aspects of students' abilities. Although alternative assessments have so many advantages, they are practical only at the classroom level not at the national level. Consequently, there seems to be no immediate replacement for the UEE as emphasized by the informants in the interviews. This study on CGPA proposal is just beginning to crack the nut.

Conclusion

At the end of the secondary education level, Iranian students undertake the most stressful experience of their lives, that is, the annual university-entrance examination, known as the Konkoor. Their scores will determine not only their university but also their field of study. This single exam defines their destiny. It has led to an intensifying cram-school culture and students' heavy memorization at the expense of creativity. It has made senior high school teachers scramble to align their curriculum with the exam content. Although it has been deemed as unfair by some parents, teachers, students, and educational officials, the Konkoor is still considered as the only fair way of allotting limited university slots to a surplus of applicants. However, some fear corruption could seep into the admissions process if the CGPA proposal is implemented. This research was an attempt to investigate this controversy.

The purpose of this study was to explore the pros and cons of relying on senior high school CGPA instead of the UEE for measuring students' qualifications to enter state universities. Most of the interviewees suggested the UEE modification rather than its abolition. The findings contributed to improving the knowledge of the UEE reform options. However, due to the limited nature of the data on which the findings of this study are based, the conclusions are provided with caution. The UEE system is a part of curriculum development process. So any innovation and reform in it can affect other components in the whole education system. That is why the informants emphasized that any change or reform should be done incrementally. It is hoped that the findings of this study will shed valuable light on the controversy over abolishing the UEE to help the educational authorities make sound decisions in this regard.

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Further reading

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