



Moderate Expectations: Barriers to Access and Complete Higher Education in Tajikistan

Listening to Stakeholders' Voices During the University Entrance Exam Reform

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	i
Abbreviations	ii
Overview.....	1
Persistent Barriers to Higher Education	2
High Hopes for Improved Access to University with the UEE Reform	3
Risks and Blind Spots: Why Barriers May Persist After the UEE Reform	4
Policy Recommendations.....	5
Short-term recommendations	5
Medium-term recommendations.....	7
Long-term recommendations	7
Monitoring of the UEE and Other Education Reforms.....	8
1. Introduction.....	9
1.1. Context.....	9
1.2. Objectives and Methodology.....	11
1.3. Structure of the Report.....	12
2. Capturing Aspirations and Constraints: Qualitative Data Collection in Communities and Universities	13
3. Significant Barriers to Accessing and Completing Higher Education.....	17
3.1. Increased Barriers beyond Basic Education.....	17
3.2. Gender Barriers	19
<i>Agency and gender norms</i>	19
<i>Lower returns in the labor market for women’s education</i>	21
<i>Parents’ expectations of lower returns for their daughters’ education</i>	22
<i>Value of education beyond the labor market</i>	22
<i>Concerns for reputation and safety with women’s mobility</i>	22
<i>Financial barriers to girls’ education</i>	23
3.3. Financial Barriers, Transparency, and Fairness	24
<i>Transparency in the allocation of financial aid</i>	24
<i>Transparency in Olympiads</i>	27
<i>Informal payments and connections to get into university</i>	28
<i>Perceptions of university students and faculty</i>	29
3.4. Quality of Secondary and Tertiary Education	30

<i>Readiness for university</i>	30
<i>Skills development and quality of education in university</i>	31
3.5. Conclusion.....	34
4. Changes in Education Barriers after the UEE: Stakeholders’ Expectations, Tutoring and University Studies	35
4.1. Initial stakeholder response to and knowledge of UEE reform.....	35
4.2. Implications of the UEE Reform for Efficiency	36
<i>High expectations that more qualified students will go to university</i>	36
<i>Improved preparation for entering university</i>	37
<i>A step toward a better signaling value of education</i>	38
4.3. Implication of the UEE Reform for Equity in Access to University	38
<i>Thriving tutoring industry</i>	38
<i>Expected changes in informal payments to access university</i>	39
4.4. Implications of the UEE Reform for Transparency and Equity during University Studies	42
<i>High school students: Cautiously optimistic about better selected students leading to better behavior in university</i> .	43
<i>University students: Less optimistic about the UEE reform bringing change to the status quo during university studies</i>	43
<i>University students and professors: Multiple opportunities for informal payments during university studies could substitute for lost income</i>	44
<i>University professors: Divergent views about continuation of informal payments</i>	45
5. Conclusion	47
5.1. Moderate Expectations in the Midst of Significant Barriers	47
5.2. Risks and Blind Spots	47
References.....	49
Appendix A: the Tajikistan Education System.....	51

List of Figures

Figure 1: Highest Diploma Obtained by Men and Women, by Gender and Age, 2013	17
Figure 2: Education Admission Rates, 2005/2006–2011/2012, for Higher Education, by Gender.....	18
Figure 3: Most Common Reasons Students Stop School after 9th grade, Noted by Parents and Out-of-School Youths (%)	19
Figure 4: Most Common Reasons Students Stop School after 9th Grade, Noted by High School Students (%)	20
Figure 5: Employment Rate by Education Level (%).....	21
Figure 6: Percent of Highest Educational Attainment by Income Quintile and Gender	23
Figure 7: Education Enrollment by Consumption Quintile	24
Figure 8: Perceptions of Transparency in the Allocation of Budget Seats by Parents and Out-of-School Youths, and University Students (%).....	25
Figure 9: Perceptions that Grading of Olympiads Is Merit-Based, Among High School Students by Location	27
Figure 10: Perception of Parents and Out-of-School Youths about Prevalence of Informal Payments for Admission to University.....	28
Figure 11: Perception of University Students about Prevalence of Informal Payments for Admission to University	29
Figure 12: Admission and Completion Rates in Higher Education, 2005/2006–2011/2012, by Gender ..	31
Figure 13: Cognitive Skills by Education Level	32
Figure 14: Socio-emotional Skills by Education Level, 2013	33
Figure 15: Barriers to Getting Jobs, 2013	33
Figure 16: Expectations for the Aptitudes of Students Admitted via the UEE, Noted by Parents and Out-of-school Youths, and University Students (%).....	37
Figure 17: Private Tutoring among High School Students by Consumption Quintile, 2013	39
Figure 18: Parents' and Out-of-School Youths' Expectations of the New UEE's Effect on Informal Payments for Access to University.....	40
Figure 19: Parents' and Out-of-School Youths' expectations of the UEE's Effect on Informal Payments for Access to University, by Location	41
Figure 20: University Students' Expectations of the New UEE's Effect on Informal Payments to Access University (%)	42
Figure 21: Tajikistan's Education System.....	51

List of Tables

Table 1: Data Sample and Collection Tools in the Six Communities	15
Table 2: Data Sample and Collection Tools at the Five Universities	16
Table 3: Highest Educational Attainment by Settlement Type and Gender, Ages 18–64.....	23
Table 4: Education System in Tajikistan, 2012–2013.....	51

List of Boxes

Box 1: The University Entrance Exam.....	11
Box 2: University Students' Comments about Informal Payments	30
Box 3: Who Corrupts First—the Student or the Professor?	44

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Abbreviations

CIS	Community of Independent States
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
GBAO	Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (Tajikistan)
GDP	Gross domestic product
GIZ	German Federal Enterprise for International Cooperation
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
NSED	National Strategy of Education and Development
NTC	National Testing Center
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RRS	Rayons of Republican Subordination
UEE	University entrance exam
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USD	United States dollar
WDR	World Development Report

Overview

For all the students who dreamed about entering university or the parents whose children or students could not enter, university, this is now one of the biggest opportunities.

- High school student, peri-urban area in Vahdat District, Rayons of Republican Subordination (RRS)

With the adoption of sweeping changes in the governance of university admission, namely the implementation of the university entrance exam (UEE) in July 2014, and with broader reforms supported by the World Bank, Tajikistan’s education system is undergoing potentially transformative change. With a clear vision of higher education playing a key role to compete in the global economy, the government of Tajikistan has adopted a new centralized university entrance exam (UEE), which aims to improve fairness and transparency in access to higher education. Previously, admission to university was managed separately by each university, putting a lot of discretion in university admission and lacking transparency. In July 2014, Tajikistan put in place a unified, centrally administered entrance exam, with several procedures to ensure that the exam is administered and graded fairly, and to minimize meddling.

The UEE reform improves governance in only one step – if a key one - in the long process to access and complete higher education: this report uses an original stakeholder assessment conducted in March and April 2014 as well as a recent nationally representative household survey to examine other steps to access and complete higher education and give voice to stakeholders’ perspectives on the new reform.¹ The reform of the university entrance exam is a significant step and sends a strong, positive signal to Tajik society about fairness. However, there are risks of adverse consequences for governance at other levels, in particular at high school and at university. Furthermore, governance is only one aspect of reforming general and higher education. In order to effectively improve equity to access and complete higher education, reforms must: (1) ensure a transparent and fair admissions process so that all students are assessed by the same criteria, (2) decrease economic and gender barriers to completing high school so that this is not the major obstacle to succeeding in the exam, and (3) ensure that governance problems in higher education do not undermine the sustainable success of the reform.

This report presents the findings of a Technical Assistance to the Government of Tajikistan that conducted a stakeholder assessment and used nationally representative household data to examine: 1) barriers to accessing and completing higher education in Tajikistan, and 2) how these barriers could change with the UEE reform. The assessment was conducted before the implementation of the UEE reform in six communities and five universities. To enable comparative analysis, a standardized package of data collection instruments was applied in the field. The instruments feature gender- and generation-specific focus group discussions (FGD) and semi-structured individual interviews with the users of education services: high school and university students, parents, and out-of-school youths. In addition, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with education providers: high school teachers and university professors. The data was conducted in urban, peri-urban and rural contexts.

¹ Taking as definition for governance “the set of political, social, economic and institutional factors which define the lines of authority, the flow of information and the individual incentives within any organization, and therefore determine the way it functions”, Savedoff, 2009, “Governance in the Health Sector: A Strategy for Measuring Determinants and Performance”. There are several different definitions of governance. This definition is broad because it includes social factors and individual incentives, and hence fits well with the framework for service provision of the 2004 World Development Report on “Making Services Work for the Poor”, where the direct relationship of providers with service users is a key element of accountability in service provision.

The data collection was conducted before the UEE reform to maintain attention to broad barriers to access and complete university; as well as to examine how the stakeholders are adapting to the UEE and perceiving its impacts. The data collection aimed to maintain the focus on barriers to access and complete higher education besides the UEE reform. The UEE is also discussed in depth in the data collection, to assess users’ awareness and understanding of it, and their preparation for the new exam, a few months before its implementation—data was collected in March and April 2014 and the UEE took place in July 2014.

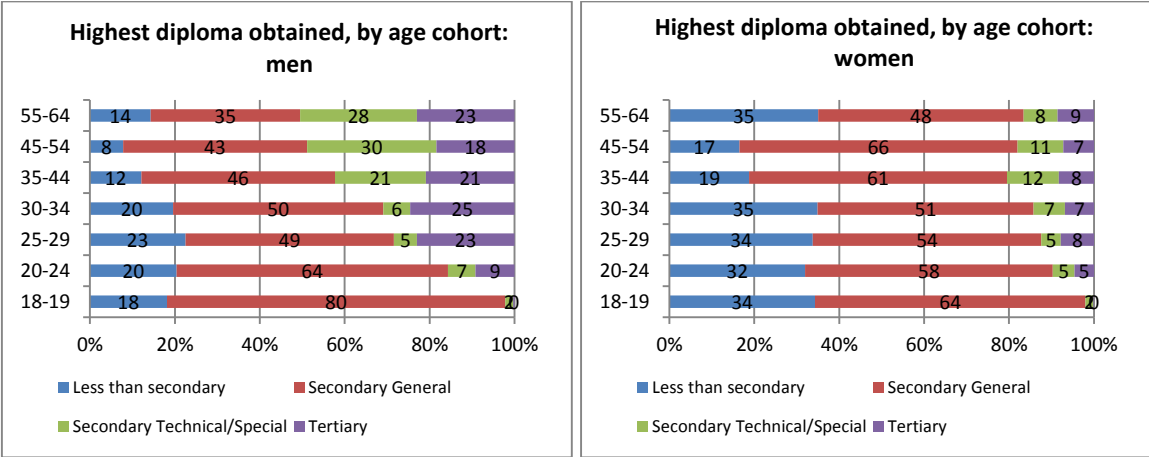
Persistent Barriers to Higher Education

Tajik students face significant barriers to access and complete higher education, with sizable differences depending on students’ location, gender and socio-economic background. School enrollment shows more inequality starting from secondary education: only 13 percent of general secondary students are from the bottom quintile of consumption, while 25 percent are from the top quintile. The difference grows starker still in higher education, where the proportion of students from the top consumption quintile is 8 times higher than the bottom quintile.

These barriers have been increasing over time. Tajik students today are twice as likely to stop their studies at the end of mandatory education as their older counterparts. The share of men and women with less than a secondary level of educational is more than twice as high among 25–34-year-olds compared to 35–54-year-olds (figure O1).

The situation is particularly alarming for women, with 1 in 3 women stopping their studies before finishing secondary education. Girls are much more likely than boys not to go beyond mandatory education and they are also less likely to attend secondary education than their older counterparts. The gender gap is even more striking in higher education: girls usually made up less than 30 percent of students admitted to university at best. There has been an improvement in 2014, the first year of the UEE, with the proportion of girls admitted increasing to 41 percent.

Figure O1: Education Completion Rates by Gender and Age, 2013



Source: Ajwad et al. (2014); and original data from World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013).

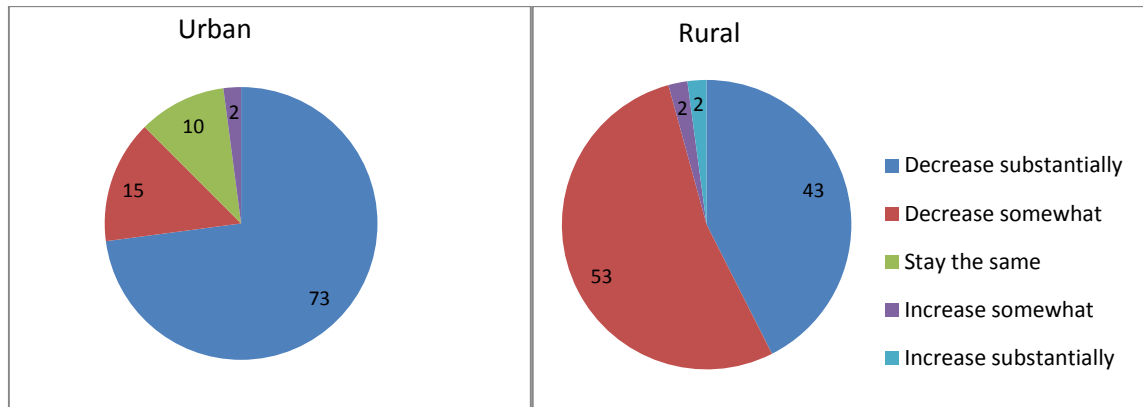
Parents and out-of-school youths interviewed in focus group discussions pointed to gender and financial reasons as the main barriers to pursuing education after 9th grade. Both female and male student focus groups most often signaled financial constraints as the main barrier (29 and 39 percent, respectively). However, gender norms for women’s and men’s roles also powerfully influence education decisions.

Study participants mention gender norms to explain the limited access of women to higher education, specifically 1) limited agency and marriage, 2) lower returns on girls' education for them and for their parents, and 3) mobility restrictions.² In total, 19 percent of the parents and out-of-school youths say that girls drop out of school to get married or to avoid a bad reputation if they continue to study. Another 23 percent mention that parents refused to let daughters study further. Only 2 percent of respondents offered this explanation in the case of boys.

High Hopes for Improved Access to University with the UEE Reform

Most study participants appreciate the transparency and clarity of the UEE reform and are hopeful that it will improve overall fairness and equity: more specifically, almost 6 out of 10 the parents and out-of-school youth participating in the study think that informal payments to get into university will decrease substantially after the reform and another third feel that they will somewhat decrease. Participants viewed the efforts to provide information and explain the process as a positive sign of reforming the transparency of university admission. Several study participants indicated that the reform is particularly beneficial for poorer students, who will be able to enter university based on merit (figure O2).

Figure O2: Parents' and Out-of-School Youths' Expectations of the Impact of the New University Entrance Exam on Informal Payments for Admission to Universities, by Location (%)



Notes: There are 48 observations in urban areas and 47 observations in rural areas. Hence, there is one missing observation in the urban sample.

Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD).

A vast majority of study participants—90% of high school students and parents, and 80% of university students—strongly think that the quality of students entering university will improve after the reform; and high school students indicated that they are preparing more rigorously for university compared to older cohorts. As students take preparation for university more seriously, the hope is that they will arrive at university more prepared. High school students commented that they are preparing intensely for the university entrance exam, in contrast to their elders who did not prepare as much. This is important given that an assessment of cognitive and socio-emotional skills conducted in a 2013 nationally representative household survey in Tajikistan indicated potential problems with the quality of university education as well as the knowledge and skills of incoming students.

But the hopes sparked by the reform are tempered by significant skepticism of increased transparency and fairness, especially in urban areas and among university students. A noteworthy number of study participants do not think that informal payments to get into university will decrease. Among study participants in urban areas, 12 percent of the parents and out-of-school youths say that informal payments for access to university will remain the same or increase after the reform. University

² Agency is the process by which women and men make choices and translate them into desired outcomes (World Bank 2012).

students are less optimistic than parents and out-of-school youths: 1 in 4 believe that informal payments to access university will remain the same. The greater degree of skepticism among university students needs to be taken seriously, as they are the most knowledgeable about university practices.

Risks and Blind Spots: Why Barriers May Persist After the UEE Reform

By putting more emphasis on student preparedness at the end of high school, the UEE brings a risk of increased competition for better high schools as well as a risk to see increases in tutoring: both could dampen equity gains from the reform. It is important that, as competition rises among high school students, the reform does not produce undesired effects. The reports of increased preparation for the exam, including with more tutoring, are good news from an efficiency perspective. However, it is important to keep in mind that not everyone can afford tutoring. In addition, the competition for access to better high schools, which produce higher success rates with the UEE, also needs to be transparent.

University students are moderately optimistic about any change in informal payments at university after the reform: they think that better prepared students thanks to the UEE are less likely to pay but they also described the multiple opportunities for informal payment in university. A total of 20 percent (1 in 5) of university students feel that informal payments in university will be unchanged, and 25 percent (1 in 4) think they will somewhat decrease. Study participants holding the view that informal payments at university will decrease argue that, as better-qualified students get into university, they will have less need to make informal payments to pass their exams. However, the reform may underestimate the capacity of the university administration and professors to extract payments from students: university students mention multiple situations for informal payments in university.

As both formal and informal university income at admission to university may decrease, there may be risk to see an increase in payments after admission. The UEE reform can affect university income in two ways. First, the number of students admitted and allocated to university is lower after the UEE: 29,713 were admitted and 27,270 were allocated a seat in a higher education institution; whereas 31,354 students were admitted in 2011/2012. This difference is due to the high failure rate in the UEE—1 in 3 students who took the exam failed. Lower admission induces a decrease in university budget. Second, if the exam is successful in making access to university more fair and transparent, it will lead to a decrease in informal income obtained from this step. The risk is that, as university income from admissions decreases after the reform, university students may face more demand for informal payments during university studies. In fact, while enrolling in university is an obvious point at which informal payments may occur, exacting such payments from students may be easier once they have invested a number of years in a field of study.

By improving transparency and fairness and by having examination centers throughout the country, the reform can help girls get access to higher education; however, gender is largely a blind spot in the reform and normative restrictions to women's mobility may prevent them from preparing for the exam. Some girls in poorer areas pointed out that the reform may be particularly beneficial for them. This is true, since financial barriers work disproportionately against women: the gap in education outcomes between men and women is even larger in poorer households. At the same time, if the competition for the UEE requires either more private tutoring or more (free) additional classes to prepare students, it is important to make sure that mobility restrictions or concerns for their safety do not prevent girls from attending such classes.

Policy Recommendations

If they have a profession and are well educated, they will have a good life and can try to make positive changes in society.

– Father, peri-urban community in Vahdat District, RRS

My parents did not agree with the fact that I come to Dushanbe because of the distance: it is 360 km. They didn't want me to go so far. [...] My teacher talked with my father. He had recommended that I apply for a Presidential quota. [...] Then my father agreed with him. As a result I successfully got into university, thanks a lot to my teacher.

– Female student, Tajik State Pedagogical University, Dushanbe

In some cases, parents do not allow their daughters to go to school. Some even say, "Why do girls need education? It is not necessary." But now after publishing the law about "the responsibilities of the parents," it is getting better.

– Mother, 33 Micro District, Dushanbe

The public support of a successful UEE reform creates a critical but brief window of opportunity to take further action to improve educational quality and inclusion in Tajikistan. The high hopes for this reform, as evidenced in this report, create momentum to improve access to and completion of higher education, in particular as they relate to transparency and fairness. The immediate period ahead will thus be critical for fostering and consolidating a norm shift in behaviors surrounding access to and completion of higher education.

This report outlines recommendations to promote successful reforms at each step in the higher-education process. Policies can be implemented to address barriers in high school, in university admissions and during university education. The recommendations are outlined in three sections: (1) short-term, (2) medium-term, and (3) long-term, and cut across the main barriers outlined in the report: limited transparency and inequitable access, particularly for poor and female students. Recommended policies also include increased monitoring and evaluation to assess the long-term impact of UEE reform.

The policies suggested in this report are in line with the direction outlined in the National Strategy of Education and Development (NSED) on "Access to Quality Education", and aim to engage users of the education system. The policies suggested correspond to the objectives of the NSED to improve the access, inclusiveness and quality of education, in particular for girls. The policies in this report also put emphasis on the involvement of students and parents at the general education level, and students in universities, in order to increase their direct monitoring of education services.

Short-term recommendations

There is need to expand the transparency effort: the Ministry of Education and Science should promote greater public awareness of UEE mechanisms, and improve transparency in other domains, such as the Olympiads and Presidential Quotas. The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) needs to ensure that all high schools disseminate information on the UEE, as well as other exams or competitions, such as the Olympiads, through assemblies and media campaigns. Additional effort should be made to reach students in poor and rural areas. In particular, students and their parents should have access to comprehensive resources to learn about the registration deadlines, eligibility criteria, preparation materials, exam format, content to be covered, and post-exam appeals process. The same is true for the Olympiad competition. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the UEE website can play an important role in providing information and offering services. For instance, students may use ICTs to report complaints and stay updated on the appeals process via an online portal. The government may also use the website to collect *anonymous* feedback from users.

As part of the transparency effort, the National Testing Center should make data on secondary school performance in the UEE publicly available to increase users' ability to monitor education services, as well as data to monitor inequality in access to higher education. The UEE reform has opened a window of opportunity to give citizens greater ability to monitor education services. Examples from other countries show that these efforts can create a virtuous circle. The UEE reform, with centralized information, makes a wealth of data available, including students' success at the secondary school level. This could allow parents and students to compare the performance of secondary schools. Even in settings where education levels are lower than in Tajikistan, once communities are more involved in monitoring providers (for example, health services) and are supplied with meaningful information, they can help improve delivery of services.³ In addition, data on the socio-economic background of the students who apply to the UEE and their success can help monitor the progress in inequality in access to higher education.

The National Testing Center can also offer sample tests and study materials that are updated regularly so all students, in particular poorer students have the same critical resources to prepare for the UEE exam. Improving the quality of the upper secondary public education system is a commendable long-term goal; however, publicly available sample tests and support can help level the playing field for disadvantaged students in the short-term. High school teachers should receive stipends to provide students with free additional UEE preparation classes. These initiatives strengthen the equity objectives of the UEE and aim to decrease the demand for private tutoring.

To reverse the disquieting trend of girls not completing secondary education, it is important to use the opportunity of increased communication around education to highlight the value of girls' education, in school and in the media. The government of Tajikistan has already taken a critical first step with the introduction of the law on "the responsibilities of parents," which directly communicates to parents the importance of their daughters' education. However, there is need for more to improve girls' education. The collaboration with mass media to advertise the UEE can be further used to promote changing attitudes surrounding gender norms. Effective messages can highlight the positive role educated women play both as mothers and in the economy. To impact long-held cultural beliefs, these campaigns must target female students and their parents throughout the entire education pipeline to alter student aspirations and family expectations.

More specifically, for access to and completion of higher education, female students will need support overcoming additional social barriers in both urban and rural areas. In order for this to become a priority on a local and individual level, it is important for the Government of Tajikistan to publicly champion increased female participation in higher education. Government and school administrators can also encourage teachers to discuss female students' academic potential with their parents. These interactions can be used to relay information about the application process as well as lessen fears about girls' safety at university. The classes offered for preparation to the UEE – discussed above – should be held during times that will maximize female participation and ensure safe transportation to and from class, in coordination between teachers and parents. While rural girls face particular barriers due to distance, there is also need to take into account the gender norms in urban areas: both urban and rural girls need custom academic and support services to further their education.

Universities need to increase transparency on campus by publicly displaying information about criteria, fees, deadlines and requirements, both for admission and for changes of field of study, particularly for the credit system that students still need to familiarize with. Universities need to be transparent about fees and tuition, by posting such information in all university and department offices as well as online, and publicizing the key rules that are relevant to students. The new credit system is

³ Björkman Nyqvist et al. 2014

subject to confusion. Clarifying the rules of the credit system strengthens the regulatory framework as guidelines and manuals are developed as outlined in the Education Action Plan 2015–2017.⁴

Medium-term recommendations

The MoES and parent-teacher associations should monitor informal payment practices in high schools. The shortage of resources in general education, especially for teacher salaries, has made informal payments a pervasive practice. This report does not focus on informal payments in high school because they have been previously studied (Open Society Institute 2010). However, participants do discuss the prevalence of informal payments in high school as a means of comparison against informal payments made to universities. Previous work suggests registering all payments made by parents as a first step in successful monitoring (Open Society Institute 2010). The development of “legal and normative regulations for the implementation of various supplementary and extracurricular programs in general educational institutions”—one of the actions of the Education Action Plan 2015–2017—can help clarify which payments are for basic needs and which payments are supplementary. The MoES can require high schools to register all formal and informal payments made to their school to improve the transparency of payment practices. Parent-teacher associations can also play an active role.

Additional support provided by universities and older students to incoming students from disadvantaged backgrounds and rural areas can improve their access to and success in higher education. Transparent budget seat application processes, put in place with the UEE reform, will hopefully improve the selection of well-qualified and deserving students. The same is true for students awarded presidential quota seats if the latter also become more transparent. These deserving students may benefit from mentorship programs during their university studies, implemented by the university, implemented by volunteering older students as well as incentivized university professors, to help them better navigate academic and social life.

In university, third-party monitoring, via more active student and youth associations, and use of the internet can help monitor information on informal payments. The existing committees for youth, sports, and tourism can become relays to monitor quality of education and gender outcomes. They could put anonymous drop-boxes in their premises for students to report on pressures to make informal payments. They can also maintain websites as well as hotlines to report such payments.

Long-term recommendations

There is need to improve the quality of secondary education, especially in poor and rural areas, in order for UEE exam success to be based more on merit and less on a student’s ability to pay for tutoring. While equity is not a first-line objective of the reform, it is implicit that the lack of transparency and fairness has affected the poor the hardest, and there is hope that they will benefit from the reform. Already, students from households with higher income use more tutoring. The risk is that this gap between those who can afford tutoring and those who cannot will widen as preparation for the exam increases. Such issues have been reported in other countries that implemented a centralized university entrance exam, such as Macedonia and Azerbaijan. Students who are better prepared during normal school hours will be less in need of tutoring for the UEE.

As skills to succeed in studies build early on, national and local governments should support early childhood development to increase both quality of students and reduce inequality. Most study participants say that a well-implemented UEE reform will promote the success of “skillful” students with “good knowledge.” However, for selection to be fair across different socio-economic backgrounds,

⁴ Two of the proposals from the Education Action Plan 2015–2017 are to “strengthen regulatory framework on credit-based education model at the bachelor’s program level” and “develop and publish guidelines and manuals for the credit-based education model.”

all students should have had the same opportunities to develop their cognitive and socio emotional skills, for which early childhood development is the first stepping stone. Comprehensive research shows that inadequate early childhood development has lifetime implications: it affects brain development, and therefore future educational attainment and economic potential. Currently, Tajik children have limited access to early childhood development and preschool education; preschool education covers only around 9 percent of 3-6 year olds. Basic cognitive skills, including problem-solving ability, numeracy and literacy, are formed by ages 8-10 and are necessarily for later acquisition of technical skills.⁵

Monitoring of the UEE and Other Education Reforms

Strengthening transparency also means being transparent about the results of the UEE, which offers a channel by which to monitor and evaluate 1) the quality of general education and 2) equity in access to higher education—and thus bolster trust in the education system. When matched with data on high schools, the UEE results can be correlated with school characteristics that are more conducive to success in the exam. In addition, given the availability of data on student registration and exam scores, the UEE allows better monitoring of equity in general education completion rates and in success on the exam—at least by sector of residence, region, and gender.

The UEE reform provides an opportunity for academic institutions and the government to track students from university enrollment to the labor market. Tracer studies can collect data on graduates' academic and professional performance, which can then inform policies on the relevance of education for the labor market and the quality of education. UEE collects data on student demographics, registration, exam results and university matriculation, making it possible to evaluate returns on education, including by field of study, as well as to compare outcomes of students with similar test scores or in similar fields of study. Furthermore, tracer studies could be used by the government to periodically reassess the allocation of budget seats to specific universities and/or fields of study based on student success in the labor market.⁶ This information could also help prospective students make more informed decisions when choosing fields of study.

⁵ Kautz et al. 2014.

⁶ 'Success' could be measured by probability of employment and average wage. A similar reform is being considered in Latvia.

1. Introduction

1.1. Context

Since 2000, with high growth in gross domestic product (GDP) that has been equitably shared, Tajikistan has achieved considerable success in poverty reduction and some key human development outcomes. Tajikistan experienced an average 6 percent growth in GDP per capita between 2000 and 2012. This growth has been shared; the bottom 40 percent also saw a 6-percent growth in consumption from 2004 to 2009. Poverty rates, measured by the national poverty line, have decreased dramatically, moving from 73 percent in 2003 to 47 percent in 2009.⁷ As Tajikistan increased its spending for human development, it has performed well in several non-income Millennium Development Goal (MDG) indicators: mandatory basic education, which comprises primary and lower secondary education. Enrollment is now almost universal.⁸

While access to basic education is almost universal, Tajikistan faces severe challenges in upper secondary school (grades 10–11) and tertiary education (universities and colleges). Gender and income inequalities in access are both high and increasing. The proportion of individuals who do not complete upper secondary education has been increasing among younger cohorts. Several MDG targets related to education are not likely to be achieved, including gender gaps in education. The gross enrollment rate in tertiary education is 22 percent, which is lower than most Europe and Central Asian countries, but much higher than countries at a similar level of economic development. There are large disparities in higher education (universities) enrollment: only around 30 percent of university students are women. Disparities with respect to income are also high: students from the top two consumption quintiles constitute 65 percent of higher education students, compared to only 16 percent from the poorest 40 percent.

Indeed, Tajikistan faces several challenges in the delivery of education services, with citizens reporting low satisfaction and frequent and high informal payments. The 2011 Household Survey on Access and Quality of Public Services for the Population indicates that satisfaction with education services is low, with only a third of urban households and 19 percent of rural households satisfied or fully satisfied with education services.⁹ The governance system for basic services changed dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union: the subsidies for the highly centralized public sector decreased, while the civil war between 1992 and 1997 severely disrupted public services. Given the drop in financial resources and weakening government accountability, informal payments from the users of public services increased as substitutes for the public financing of these services. Findings from the 2010 Life in Transition Survey indicate that 18 percent of participants in Tajikistan reported making informal payments for primary or secondary education, and 39 percent for access to the public health system, making Tajikistan one of the five countries with the highest prevalence of informal payments.¹⁰ For example, for access to higher education, students' families have reportedly paid thousands of dollars to be accepted at the more prestigious universities, but even less prominent universities require hundreds of dollars.¹¹

⁷ Azevedo et al. 2014

⁸ Spending on education, health, social insurance, and social protection increased from 36% of total public expenditures in 2001–2003 to 43% in 2007–2011 (Presentation by the Development Coordination Council to the Tajikistan 2012 Development Forum).

⁹ Presentation by the Development Coordination Council to the Tajikistan 2012 Development Forum. See <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Tajikistan-2012-Development-Forum-DCC-Presentation.pdf>.

¹⁰ European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), 2011.

¹¹ US Department of State, 2011, *2010 Human Rights Reports: Tajikistan* (downloaded from <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/160062.pdf>, on October 20, 2013).

The quality of education is also problematic: cognitive skills vary substantially within education levels, indicating significant variations in the quality of education, as well as potentially poor selection of students for university. Nationally representative data from the Tajikistan Jobs, Migration, Skills, and Consumption Survey, conducted in 2013, indicates that both cognitive skills (such as literacy and numeracy) and socio-emotional skills (such as openness to new ideas and people or workplace attitude and behavior) increase with educational attainment.¹² However, there is a sizable overlap in the distributions of these skills for individuals who only complete secondary education versus those who go on to tertiary education. This may indicate that many who attain higher education levels do not have better skills, raising questions about the selection of individuals into higher education and the quality of education received. Until 2014, each university independently selected its students. This injects a lot of discretion into the selection process and decreases transparency. Many Tajik youths feel that non-transparent selection decreases students' incentives to learn, creating a skills deficit.¹³ Students poorly selected may also find it hard to pursue their studies: in Tajikistan, 20–30 percent of students drop out during their university studies.

The government of Tajikistan views education, particularly higher education, as a vital component to competing in the global economy. The government has been implementing reforms to improve the quality in this sector that has been expanding since 2000. At independence (in 1991), there were 13 higher education institutions, which enrolled 70,000 students. The number of students started growing rapidly after 2000. By the academic year 2012/2013, there were 35 institutions enrolling 150,100 students. Tajikistan's *National Strategy for Education Development through 2020* aims to modernize existing higher education curricula to better meet labor market demand and to build Tajikistan's economic capacity.¹⁴ The government is currently focusing on joining the Bologna Declaration (of June 19, 1999) as the first step of a series of reforms to integrate into the European Higher Education Area.

In particular, with support from the World Bank, the government of Tajikistan has embarked on key reforms to improve transparency and fairness in delivery of education, beginning with a highly symbolic and publicized reform of the university entrance exam (UEE) to improve transparency and equity in student selection and access to university. In general education, the World Bank has supported the reinforcement and training of parent-teacher associations. For admission to university, the reform of the UEE—a centralized exam for admission to all universities in Tajikistan—has been implemented with the support of the Russian Education Aid for Development Trust Fund (administered by the World Bank), the Open Society Institute, and the World Bank (Box 1). For university studies, the World Bank also plans to support further education reforms via a higher education project, of which one of the objectives is to improve access to higher education for the poor.

¹² Ajwad et al. 2014

¹³ UNICEF and Tajikistan Ministry of Education, 2012

¹⁴ See <http://www.globalpartnership.org/content/national-strategy-education-development-republic-tajikistan-till-2020>.

Box 1: The University Entrance Exam

The World Bank has supported the government of Tajikistan's institution of a single centralized exam, the university entrance exam (UEE), for admission to all state universities, aiming to make university admission procedures more transparent and fair. Similar reforms have occurred in all Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, except Turkmenistan. The previous process for entrance to university was decentralized, where each university had its own specific exams or steps for admission, with no standardized tests or procedures.

The UEE differs from the university entrance process in previous years in four ways:

1. Students are allowed up to 10 options for choosing a specific university, field of study, and type of funding (government subsidized budget seat or regular tuition seat).
2. The university entrance exam is offered in test centers around the country. Previously, students had to travel to each university location to apply.
3. Administration of the UEE is centralized: subject preparation and grading are handled centrally by the National Testing Center, an entity placed under the Executive Office of the President.
4. To take the UEE, students pay a fee equivalent to USD 30. While this may seem high in Tajikistan, in comparison to the previous system, students presumably save on travel cost and, more importantly, on informal payments.

The University Entrance Exam, which consists of a mix of multiple-choice and open questions, was implemented nationally for the first time in July 2014. It successfully attracted a large number of applicants: 52,402 students registered—25 percent more than in 2013.

Of the 45,904 students who took the exam, only 65 percent passed, sending a strong signal that a minimum level of knowledge and skills is required for access to university, regardless whether students requested a budget seat or paid tuition.

1.2. Objectives and Methodology

This report presents the findings of a Technical Assistance to the Government of Tajikistan that conducted a stakeholder assessment that examined barriers to accessing and completing higher education in Tajikistan and expectations for the UEE reform.

The reform of the UEE aims to improve fairness and transparency in students' access to higher education, but it is only one step—although a key one—in a long process. This report examines the other steps to accessing and completing higher education. While the university entrance exam is a key step to access to higher education, improving this step may not be sufficient, given other significant barriers, and the reform may simply displace some of the problems of access, resulting in a limited impact. The UEE reform will not be successful if other barriers prevent improvements in equity to access and complete higher education. This report sheds light on these other steps.

The main questions explored in the report are: 1) what are the current barriers to accessing and completing higher education - as experienced by stakeholders in the education system - and 2) how could they change with the UEE reform? This report explores the attitudes, expectations, and practices that surround secondary education, academic preparations to attend university, the entrance exam, admissions, and university life. The study discusses barriers to access and complete higher education, particularly relating to gender and income, and governance issues at the universities. In addition, the study probes into how and why local stakeholders expect the new university entrance exam will help improve equity of access to higher education.

Understanding citizens' perceptions is key to understanding their education decisions. What is the incentive for students to study if they think that their efforts may not be rewarded? There is a

growing literature on student decision-making based on perceived costs and returns to education.¹⁵ This stakeholder analysis offers an opportunity to listen to the experiences and perspectives of the users of the Tajikistan education system: high school and university students, parents, and out-of-school youths. Perceived barriers to higher education—regardless of practice— may shape individuals education decisions. For instance, a student may decide not to apply to university if (s)he believe the university selection process is based on ability to make informal payments and the student making this decision is unable to pay.

To allow in-depth discussions of such sensitive topics as gender barriers and informal payments, qualitative data was collected in March and April 2014 from users and providers of secondary and higher education, in six communities and five universities. To enable comparative analysis, a standardized package of data collection methods was applied in the field. The methods featured gender- and generation-specific focus group discussions (FGD) and semi-structured individual interviews with the users of education services: high school and university students, parents, and out-of-school youths. In addition, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with education providers: high school teachers and university professors. The report mainly presents the findings of the focus group discussions with users, as well the individual interviews with university faculty. The analysis was conducted in urban, peri-urban and rural contexts.

The data collection was conducted before the UEE reform, for four reasons: 1) to maintain attention to other steps to access and complete university studies; 2) to examine how students and parents prepare for the new exam; 3) to conduct a rapid assessment of awareness and understanding of the reform; and 4) to allow comparison after the reform. The UEE is discussed in depth in the data collection, to assess users' awareness and understanding of it, and their preparation for the new exam, a few months before its implementation—data was collected in March and April 2014 and the UEE took place in July 2014. However, the UEE was only one of the topics covered in the data collection and the data collection aimed to maintain the focus on barriers to access and complete higher education besides the UEE reform. Lastly, having a snapshot of perceptions before the reform allows conducting a comparison after the reform.

1.3. Structure of the Report

The report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 presents the main questions explored in the report and the methodology to answer these questions, in particular, the qualitative data collection in communities and universities. Chapter 3 discusses access to and completion of higher education, including the barriers faced by users starting from the end of mandatory education, with a focus on how barriers differ for women and rural residents. Chapter 4 discusses how the UEE reform may change these barriers and chapter 5 concludes.

¹⁵ Jensen 2011; Nguyen 2011.

2. Capturing Aspirations and Constraints: Qualitative Data Collection in Communities and Universities

The report explores two questions:

1. **What are the current barriers to accessing and completing higher education – as experienced by stakeholders in the education system: the report explores current practices, expectations, and concerns of high school students, university students and their parents; putting more emphasis on access to university and university studies than in previous work.** Barriers may exist to completing secondary education or could be related to governance issues once a student is enrolled in university. Gender constraints to access to university are also addressed in particular. When examining financial barriers, and informal payments in particular, this report puts more emphasis on the critical period of transition from high school to university, as well as on barriers to success in university because informal payments in high school have been examined in previous studies.¹⁶ A contribution of this report is the students' transition into university as well as their experiences at university.
2. **How could barriers change after the UEE reform: What are stakeholders' expectations of the reform and its potential impacts on equity in university education, as well as on the quality of students? Are there other barriers that could mute the impact of the reform?** In addition to understanding how students and parents are modifying the way they prepare to attend university, the study also assesses whether they believe that the reform will be effective in reducing informal payments. As for the quality of students, the reform may improve efficiency by decreasing the number of students who drop out of university, thanks to a better match between student academic aptitudes and education opportunities.

Using the framework of the 2004 *World Development Report* to look at the UEE reform's effect on transparency, the report focuses on the users and providers of education services and their direct relationship.¹⁷ The 2004 *World Development Report* highlighted three types of relationships between policy makers (officials and politicians), providers (education institutions), and users (students and their parents): 1) Voice, the ability of citizens to speak their concerns and influence policy decisions; 2) Accountability from education providers to policy makers; 3) Direct accountability from providers to users of education services. The UEE reform increases the transparency of the exam process and selection criteria to enter university; it also comes with improved information for parents and clearer mechanisms for redress, which increases the direct accountability of providers to users.

In examining the barriers faced by women in access to education, the report draws on the framework of the 2012 *World Development Report*.¹⁸ It describes how gender outcomes are the result of three dimensions: markets, formal institutions (legal frameworks, public services), and “informal” institutions, such as norms and networks. This report discusses differences in returns to education between men and women, as potential drivers of differentials in education investments. The report also discusses whether there are specific barriers faced by women in accessing and completing higher education and how these barriers are shaped by gender norms.

The main findings of this report build on original qualitative data collection —focus group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews—which is particularly suitable for assessing how and why expectations may be changing in a population and for exploring sensitive topics, such as gender norms and governance. Focus group discussions among users—parents, high

¹⁶ Open Society Institute (OSI) (2010): *Drawing the Line: Parental Informal Payments for Education across Eurasia*; and UNICEF/Tajikistan Ministry of Education (2012): *Youth Perspectives of Education Quality in Tajikistan*.

¹⁷ *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People*.

¹⁸ *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equity and Development*.

school students, and university students—allow for rich interactions among participants to better understand the prevailing norms, while individual interviews allow deeper probes into specific experiences and provide greater privacy for discussions of sensitive topics.

The study sample covers a diverse population of better-off and poorer high school communities and varied universities. While not statistically representative, the findings presented here likely have relevance in many communities beyond the sample, given the heterogeneity of the study sites and participants.

Even if qualitative data collection captures a fraction of the population’s perception of unfairness in access to education, their concerns cannot be dismissed: why would they study if they think that effort is not rewarded? Because education is a key element of intergenerational mobility—objectively and in citizens’ perceptions—education fairness is an important process for individuals to feel that the playing field is even. Their concerns about fairness need to be heard and addressed.

To provide a broader context and anchor the findings, the qualitative findings are framed by new analysis of nationally representative household data and are discussed in the light of recent World Bank work on education, skills, and jobs. This report uses results of a recent World Bank report: Ajwad et al, 2014. It also conducts additional analysis using the World Bank/German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) *Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey*. This survey was conducted from July to September 2013. It collects comprehensive information not typically captured by traditional household surveys and is representative at the national, regional (Oblast), and urban/rural levels. The survey comprises a core questionnaire and a skills questionnaire (Appendix B). The sample size of the core questionnaire is 3,300 households with a total of 20,142 individuals. Depending on the household, one or two individuals per household were randomly selected to partake in the skills questionnaire. The second skills questionnaire sample consists of 4,892 individuals (Ajwad et al., 2014).

The study sample includes 96 parents and 93 high school students in 6 communities, with focus groups held separately for males and females (Table 1). The data collection covered 2 urban communities in Dushanbe City, 1 urban community in Khujand, 1 peri-urban community in the Vahdat District in the Region of Republican Subordination (RRS), 1 rural community in Qistervaz District in the Sughd Region, and 1 rural community in Roshtqala District in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). The communities chosen cover a wide range of socio-economic status: 3 poor communities and 3 middle-class communities (table 1). During the pilot test, an additional 4 communities were sampled: 1 in Khatlon, 1 in Varzbob, and 2 in Dushanbe.¹⁹

In each community, 4 focus group discussions were conducted: with high school students, as well as parents and out-of-school youth, separating groups for men and women. In addition, individual interviews were conducted with a parent, an out-of-school youth, and a teacher in each community (3 interviews). High school students were selected randomly from the roster of high school students, stratified by grade and by students’ attendance at free additional classes. Parents and out-of-school youth (students who stopped their schooling after 9th grade) were selected by each school’s headmaster. The analysis of community data mostly derives from focus group discussions with users.

¹⁹ The data from the pilot is not presented in the report, unless it supports a key point. While it is not presented, the findings were broadly similar to those of the main data collection.

Table 1: Data Sample and Collection Tools in the Six Communities

Community	Poverty status*	Location	Focus groups		Individual interviews		Main activity
			Students	Parents	High school teachers	Parents and out-of-school youths	
33 Micro District (Dushanbe City)	Poor	Urban	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	1	2	Trade; and a lot of migration to Russia
Sadbarg, Shohmansur District (Dushanbe City)	Middle	Urban	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	17 <i>9 male, 8 female</i>	1	2	Businessmen, professors, doctors, and lawyers. Has some of the top schools in the district.
Bahor, Vahat District (RRS)	Poor	Peri-Urban	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	1	2	Basic agriculture
Rural community, Qistervaz District (Sughd)	Middle	Rural	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	1	2	Close to Kyrgyz Republic. Developed agriculture and cattle
Rural community, Roshtqala District (GBAO)	Poor	Rural	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	1	2	Agriculture, but land of poor quality
Khujand (Sughd)	Middle	Urban	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	1	2	Businessmen, professors, doctors
Total			96 <i>48 male, 48 female</i>	97 <i>49 male, 48 female</i>	6	12	

*The poverty status is reported by key informants in the community.

A total of 86 university students took part in the higher education focus groups at 5 universities; 2 faculty members were also interviewed at each university (Table 2). A wide range of faculties were covered at the universities in Dushanbe and Khujand. At each university, 2 focus group discussions were conducted—with separate groups for male and female students—as well as 3 individual interviews—2 with university faculty and 1 with a university student. Focus group discussions were also conducted at 2 universities during the pilot: 1 in Kurgan-Tepa and 1 in Dushanbe. At each university, a professor selected 14 students of each gender, and the study moderator chose 8 from these 14 students. The students selected were in different fields of study and had various socio-economic backgrounds.

The data collection tools mainly feature open-ended questions; however, pre-coded questions were introduced to anchor the replies of participants. On several key study topics, focus group members were first asked to rate their responses individually and anonymously to capture a study participant’s perceptions and experiences, and then the pattern of responses was presented for reflection and discussion by the focus group participants.

The questionnaire is designed to minimize leading questions and has a long first part that allows a general discussion of the UEE and barriers to access to university. Although discussing informal payments is an objective of the study, each focus group first discussed the study participants’ aspirations

and their preparations for university, work, or other goals. High school students were not asked any direct question about informal payments.

Table 2: Data Sample and Collection Tools at the Five Universities

Location	University	Student Focus groups	Individual interviews	
			<i>Professors or university administrators</i>	<i>Students</i>
Dushanbe City	Russian-Tajik Slavonic University	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	2	1
	Tajik State Pedagogical University	17 <i>8 male, 9 female</i>	2	1
	National University of Tajikistan	17 <i>8 male, 9 female</i>	2	1
	Tajik State Medical University	17 <i>9 male, 8 female</i>	2	1
Khujand	Khujand State University	16 <i>8 male, 8 female</i>	2	1
Total		12	12	6

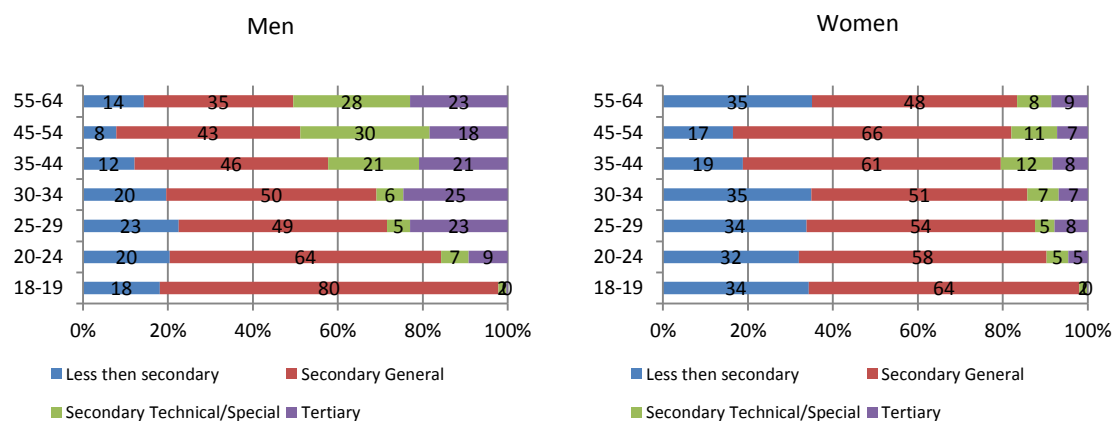
3. Significant Barriers to Accessing and Completing Higher Education

The education trends in Tajikistan in recent decades have been discouraging with fewer young Tajiks, particularly females, going on to higher education than older cohorts. Participants in the study attributed this negative trend to two main barriers: financial constraints and gender norms. Participants from both genders say that financial constraints are the main barrier to continuing education, and the majority of participants feel that there is a lack of transparency and fairness in the university application process, from the allocation of budget and presidential quotas and the Olympiad competition to the practice of using informal payments to get into university. Unsurprisingly, university professors feel that approximately half of incoming students are not prepared academically, and quantitative evidence supports this claim by showing a large variation in cognitive skills among students. Participants also expressed the limited agency of many female students. Fathers, husbands and even brothers have control over many women’s educational and labor market decisions, and will discourage or forbid female students from continuing education because of perceived low labor market returns after marriage and/or fear of daughters’ safety at university. Female students from poor families are further disadvantaged, because families will often prioritize boys schooling.

3.1. Increased Barriers beyond Basic Education

Compared with older cohorts, young Tajiks have become twice as likely to stop their studies at the end of mandatory education. The share of men and women with less than a secondary level of education is more than twice as high among 25- to 34-year-olds, compared to 40- to 54-year-olds (Figure 1). Data suggests that this trend cannot be solely linked to disruption of studies during the civil war because it also holds true for the younger generation aged 29 and younger, who attained secondary education after the civil war.

Figure 1: Highest Diploma Obtained by Men and Women, by Gender and Age, 2013



Source: Ajwad et al. (2014), using World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013).

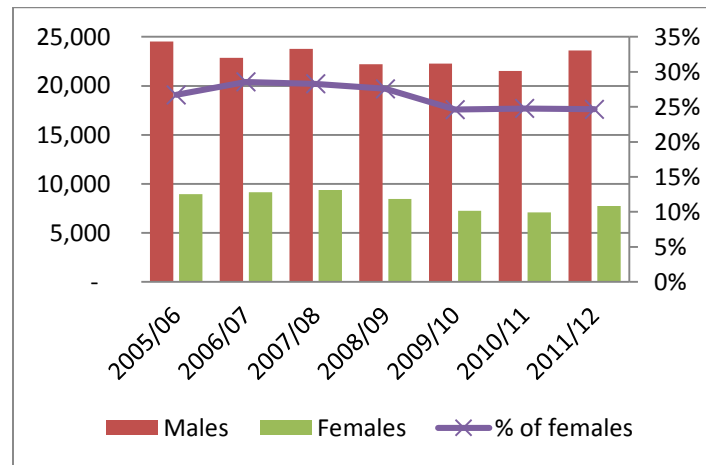
In particular, girls are much more likely than boys to stop studying after mandatory education (9th grade) and are less likely to attend secondary school than their older counterparts. More than 1 in 3 girls between the ages of 25 and 34 have not completed secondary education, compared to a little over 1 in 5 boys. Moreover, women in the younger cohorts are less likely to complete secondary education than their older counterparts: the proportion of girls completing secondary education among the 25–29 age group is 54 percent, versus 65 percent among women aged 40–49.²⁰ Among younger students, the

²⁰ It should be noted that the proportion of girls completing secondary education is actually slightly higher than the proportion of boys. What seems to be happening is that male students who usually attend vocational school are now dropping out at the

trend of completing secondary education is improving, but the gap between girls and boys is increasing. There is a 6 percentage point gap between men and women aged 20-24 who complete secondary education, and the gap jumps to 16 percentage points among 18-19 year olds.

The gender gap is more striking in higher education: girls usually make up less than 30 percent of students admitted to university, although this proportion increased to 41 percent in 2014. Between the 2005/2006 school year and 2011/2012 school years, the proportion of women enrolled varied between 25 and 30 percent (Figure 2). The UEE results show that girls are less likely to apply to university: only 37 percent of those who registered for the UEE are female. However, more girls (70%) are successfully passing the entrance exam than boys (62%).

Figure 2: Education Admission Rates, 2005/2006–2011/2012, for Higher Education, by Gender

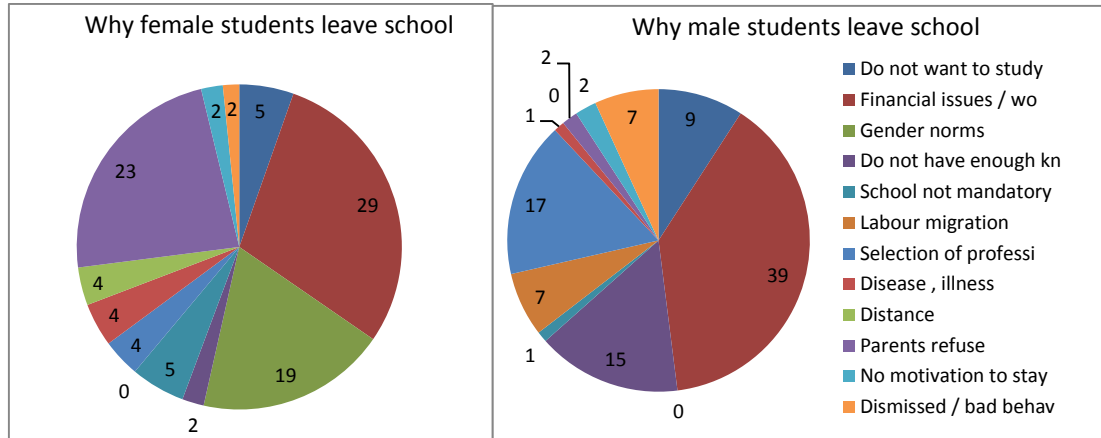


Sources: Graph from World Bank (2014a); and Ministry of Education (2012), “Statistical Collection Sphere Education: Republic of Tajikistan 2011–2012.”

Parents and out-of-school youths indicate that financial barriers and gender norms - including marriage - are key obstacles to continuing studies after mandatory education. Female and male focus group participants cite financial constraints as the main reason for discontinuing formal education (Figure 3). However, women also stop schooling because of marriage or expectations to marry: 19 percent of the parents and out-of-school youths mention that girls drop out of school because of marriage or they fear a bad reputation if they continue their studies. Another 23 percent notes that “parents refuse” to let them continue to attend school. Conversely, only 2 percent of participants indicate this for boys. For boys, 17 percent of parents and out-of-school youths say that learning a profession, possibly in technical colleges, is a reason to stop general education, while 7 percent mention migration for better labor opportunities.

end of mandatory education. Female students who traditionally attend secondary general or vocational education still are dropping out as well.

Figure 3: Most Common Reasons Students Stop School after 9th grade, Noted by Parents and Out-of-School Youths (%)



Notes: There is one missing observation in the urban sample. “Gender norms” in the legend include “marriage,” “fear for reputation,” “religion,” and “no hijab allowed.”

Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD), sample of parents and out-of-school youth, with separate groups for male and female study participants. The data of close-ended questions was collected individually and anonymously among focus group participants.

3.2. Gender Barriers

Gender inequality is our biggest problem. Especially after marriage, women are not entitled to their own opinions. They are completely dependent on their husbands.

– Female student, Russian Tajik Slavonic University

The parents who do not allow their daughters to study think that education is not important for girls. They think that the most important thing for women is to be a very faithful wife to their husbands and always obey whatever her husband says ... A woman cannot go anywhere and she does not have the right to divorce her husband; she has to live with him and depend on him till death. They [parents] think that this is right...and required by religion. They don't think about what will happen if her husband leaves her and she has to come back to her parents with four children. The worst thing is that they think their daughter will be happy, but this is not true. In the meantime, most newly married couples get divorced.

– Female student, State Medical University

Agency and gender norms

Almost a quarter of parents and out-of-school youths in the study sample select parents’ refusal to let their daughters continue studying after 9th grade as a leading cause for withdrawing from education. These findings on normative constraints are pervasive, emerging across urban and rural, and better off and poorer communities.

The narrative accounts indicate that fathers make the major education decisions in the household. The female out-of-school youths in the study sample stress their fathers’ opposition to their studies, including those living in better-off study sites. By contrast, men who dropped out of school never mention their fathers as preventing them from studying, or explicitly stated that their

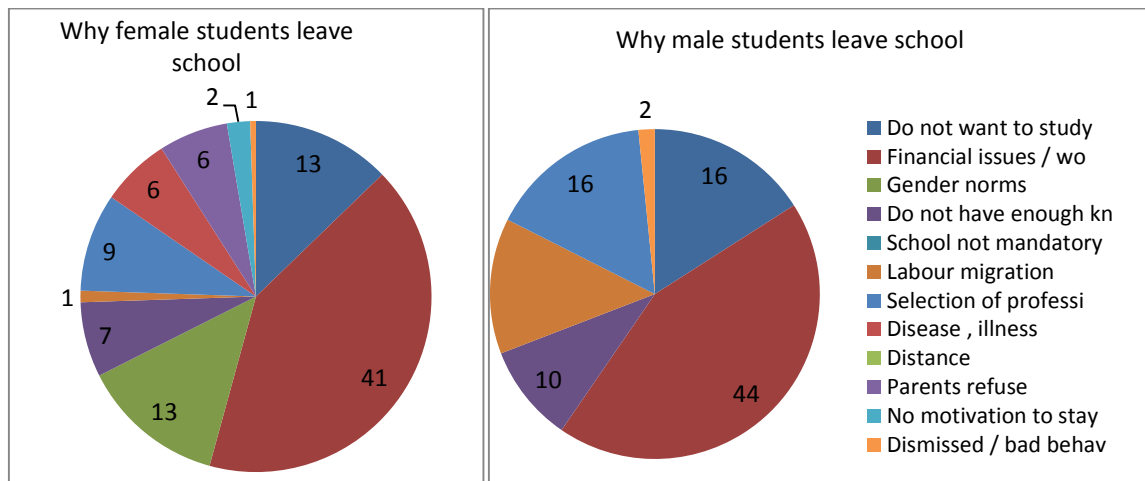
fathers made them stop for financial reasons. Mothers are rarely cited as the sole decision-maker in regard to their children’s education.²¹

Furthermore, there seems to be a negative dynamic, whereby parents do not let their daughters study because they expect that their future husbands will not let them study or work. If girls get married, the decision-maker role shifts to their husbands, perpetuating gender barriers for girls continuing higher education. Instead of either delaying marriage or discussing with the potential husbands whether to allow their daughters to continue their studies after marriage, parents simply stop investing in education, since they do not see its value if girls do not work.

Gender norms that perpetuate gender inequalities also exist among the more-educated: university students also referred to fathers, brothers, and husbands as stopping women from studying. Participants in four of the five universities reported that brothers might prevent their sisters from studying. A male student in the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University, from a middle-class family and whose father is a lawyer stated: “I would not let my sister continue studying. Let her sit at home, be busy with housework. She will get married and this is more useful for her.” Both male and female university students reiterated that parents, and fathers in particular, make the final decision regarding schooling. One female student narrates, “If your father says, ‘You can’t study anymore, I’ll get you married,’ the girl cannot do anything.” The transfer of decision-making power from father to husband is also expressed: one male university student states, “[women] will get married and who knows whether the husband will allow them to work or not.”

A positive sign is that high school students are less likely than parents or out-of-school youths to mention gender norms as a barrier to continue studying. High school students still note gender norms and refusal of parents to let girls study, but only 19 percent note these two reasons (Figure 4), versus 42 percent of parents. Still, in the poor 33 Micro District in Dushanbe, female high school students say that men question a woman’s willingness to study: “Girls even have difficulty getting married after being educated at university, since some guys have problems understanding them.”

Figure 4: Most Common Reasons Students Stop School after 9th Grade, Noted by High School Students (%)



Notes: Study participants reported the top two reasons that students left school. “Gender norms” in the legend include “marriage,” “fear for reputation,” “religion,” and “no hijab allowed.”

Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD), sample of high school students grouping male and female study participants.

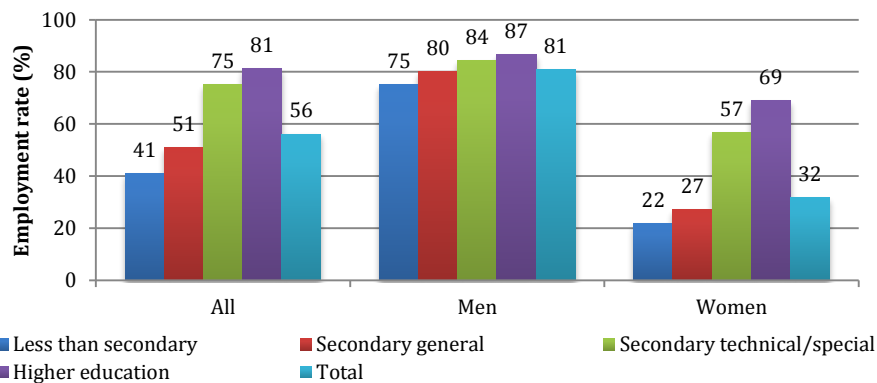
²¹ Participants mention “my father” 53 times, “my parents” or “my father and mother” 48 times, and “my mother” 17 times. Only 3 mothers and 2 out-of-school youths say that mothers make decisions without mentioning fathers.

Lower returns in the labor market for women's education

Across most study sites, with the exception of Roshtqala District in GBAO, participants highlight the key role of men as providers for their families, while women are expected to marry and not work, implying limited economic returns to their education. These findings cut across both middle-class and poor study areas, including Khujand and Vahdat District, respectively. The village surveyed in Roshtqala District (GBAO) is an exception, reflecting traditions of women's education in GBAO. Most parents in this area stress that both girls' and boys' education are important. A father aptly summarizes this view: "In our village context, there is no difference between girls and boys. They are all equal: they get equal education in school and equal upbringing at home. The rest depends on their knowledge. Regardless whether the family is poor or rich, they have to study."

In part due to gender norms - on movement and agency, returns to female education in the labor market are lower than returns on male education: women's employment rate, at 32 percent, is almost three times lower than men's, although it increases with education. While the employment gap narrows substantially with education, there is still a difference of 18 percentage points between women and men with higher education: 69 percent employment rate among women, versus 87 percent among men (Figure 5). A girl in a village in Roshtqala District (GBAO) described how being educated opens opportunities for women: "If girls get married, they have to be educated because being uneducated is an embarrassment for most girls and their families. So if they are not educated, they have to sit in their husband's house and can only take care of the house and children. If they are educated, they have a choice to work somewhere."

Figure 5: Employment Rate by Education Level (%)



Note: Respondents aged 25–64.

Source: Ajwad et al. (2014), using World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013).

When women do participate in the labor market, the majority of students do not mention gender differences in the ability to find a job. Some female university students, however, note that women cannot get certain jobs. When asked whether it is easier for men or women to find a job, few university students remarked that it is more difficult for women.²² Female students do feel that work opportunities are constrained by norms in the workplace and society. For instance, female students feel that women are unable to work in jobs that require traveling or working at night. One female student

²² These findings reflect the fact that, in Ajwad et al., 2014, using the World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013), discouragement rates are lower for women than men. Discouraged workers are defined as people who are not in the labor force and are available to work, but are no longer looking for a job because they do not believe they will find one (Ajwad et al. 2014).

from Russian-Tajik Slavonic University stated, “Sometimes women are not allowed to go on business trips, so for this kind of job they will hire a man.”

Parents’ expectations of lower returns for their daughters’ education

Given gender norms in Tajikistan, daughters traditionally leave the home upon marriage and sons care for aging parents. As a consequence, a daughter’s labor-market returns are less valued, which may also be driving gender differences in parents’ education decisions. Parents expect to benefit from their sons’ future income, partly because they will live with one or more of their sons. By contrast, they do not expect the same from daughters or their future income, since they are expected to leave the house when they get married. Parent and female student participants most clearly explained differences in the anticipated labor market returns between males and females:

Women’s education doesn’t make any differences to a family’s economic situation. When a girl gets married, she is considered to be a member of her husband’s family and usually her husband’s family benefits from her. As for men, they remain with their families even after marriage, which is why they get all the investments in them.

– Female high school student, 33 Micro District, Dushanbe

Most parents think that spending their money for boys means their sons will feed them when they are old. And they also think that there is no need to spend money on girls, as they will get married and go to another household.

– Mother, village in Qistervaz District, Sughd

Value of education beyond the labor market

Some study participants stressed the value of women’s education for the next generation. Taking care of children is clearly a traditional role for women in Tajik society and, as such, they play a key role in helping their children learn and progress in their studies. A female high school student in the rural study site in Roshtqala District particularly described the important role of women, given high migration rates and absent fathers: “A girl is a future mother, so she should be educated in order to educate her children. Today, because most fathers are migrating, the mother has the sole responsibility of raising the children, so she should be educated in order to bring up her children properly.” At Khujand University, a male student actually mention care of children as the main justification for female education: “I think that girls must be educated because they will bring up the kids.”

Concerns for reputation and safety with women’s mobility

In addition to valuing labor market returns to their daughters’ education less than to their sons’, parents are also concerned about their daughters’ safety and behavior when they study away from home. Study participants mention that parents want their daughters to stay at home and do jobs, such as sewing or tailoring, which can be practiced without leaving the house. A mother in the peri-urban community in Vahdat District described the constant worries of parents for their daughters: “If boys do something bad or run after girls, it doesn’t affect [boys’] dignity, but a girl can lose her dignity in one moment. Because of this, parents don’t want to send their daughters to study.” A father in the same community expressed a similar concern: “Some parents are afraid that their daughters will grow up and do immoral things and bring shame on them. It is another reason to take girls out of school.” Even in the village in Roshtqala District, where study participants expressed strong support for girl education, a father had concerns about his daughters leaving the village to study.

Given the constraints to women’s mobility and parental concerns about their safety, girls in rural areas and even in urban areas outside of Dushanbe face worse education outcomes. In urban areas, the proportion of men who complete higher education is 2.4 times higher than the proportion of women; in rural areas, they are almost 5 times more likely to complete higher education (Table 3). In Dushanbe, where many students come from far away, the proportion of female students is the lowest, at

25 percent, potentially reflecting the preference for girls not to study away from home. By comparison, in Sughd, the proportion of female students is 36 percent, and 58 percent in GBAO.

Table 3: Highest Educational Attainment by Settlement Type and Gender, Ages 18–64

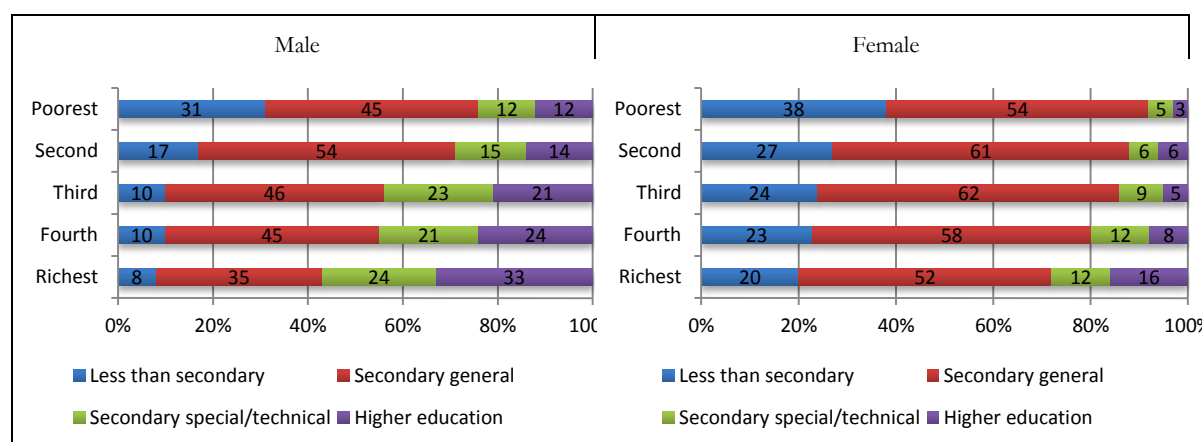
	Less than secondary education (%)	Secondary general education (%)	Secondary technical/special education (%)	Higher education (%)
Men				
Urban	10.5	35.7	17.5	36.2
Rural	16.2	48.3	20.0	15.4
Total	14.5	44.5	19.3	21.6
Women				
Urban	21.3	45.9	14.6	18.2
Rural	28.3	61.8	6.4	3.4
Total	26.3	57.1	8.8	7.8

Source: Ajwad et al. (2014), using World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013).

Financial barriers to girls' education

Restrictive norms weigh heaviest on daughters of poor households. In the bottom quintile of consumption, the proportion of women with higher education is 4 times lower than the proportion of men (3 and 12 percent, respectively). Along the distribution of consumption, the gap in educational attainment between men and women narrows, although it remains sizable (Figure 6). In the top quintile, 16 percent of women have completed higher education, clearly much higher than the 3 percent in the bottom quintile. However, this is still 2 times lower than the top quintile of men, where 33 percent have completed higher education.

Figure 6: Percent of Highest Educational Attainment by Income Quintile and Gender



Source: Ajwad et al. (2014), using World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013).

Given substantial financial barriers to accessing education, parents prioritize boys' education. A woman in the better-off Sadbarg neighborhood of Dushanbe who left school described a common situation in which financial issues and gender norms interact and play against female education: “Our family didn’t have enough money and my mother said that there is no need for girls to study.” In the study, parents, out-of-school youths, and high school students sensed that if financial constraints eased, girls could have more education opportunities:

If the conditions are good, it does not matter who is studying—daughter or son.

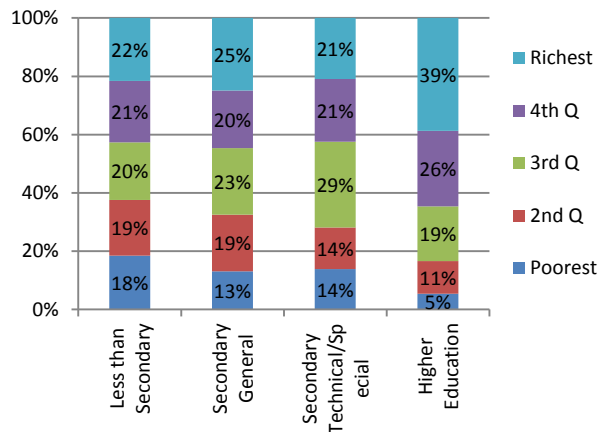
Now most people don't have a job and because of this they don't have money to pay for the education of their daughters. Perhaps if they had money, they would pay for their daughters' education.

– Female high school student, peri-urban community, Vahdat District, RRS

3.3. Financial Barriers, Transparency, and Fairness

According to nationally representative household data, students from higher consumption quintiles are much more likely to enroll in higher education. The bottom 40 percent makes up only 16 percent of the higher education students (Ajwad et al. 2014). While enrollment in grades 1 through 9 is equitable, with students from each quintile making up around 20 percent of students enrolled in basic education, enrollment shows more inequality starting in secondary education (after grade 9). Only 13 percent of general secondary students are from the bottom quintile, while 25 percent of the students come from the top quintile. The difference grows starker still in higher education: the proportion of students from the top consumption quintile is 8 times higher than the bottom quintile (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Education Enrollment by Consumption Quintile



Source: Ajwad et al. (2014), using World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013).

The findings of the qualitative data collection reflect the household data, with 40 percent of parents and out-of-school youths mentioning financial barriers as the reason boys leave school after 9th grade (in the case of girls, 30 percent of parents and out-of-school youths mention financial barriers). Financial barriers—especially financing issues or opportunity costs (when students' need to stop their studies to get a job) —are the top reasons for ending education after 9th grade for boys. In all study sites, out-of-school youths pointed to financial problems as the leading reason to leave school, with the exception of out-of-school women in Khujand and the Sadbarg neighborhood, who mention distance or the fact that their fathers would not allow them to study. A male who stopped studying after high school in the poor peri-urban area in Vahdat District described a mix of direct financial and opportunity costs: “One reason for me was financial. I did not have money to apply to university. My father also did not have a helper for his work, so this was another reason.”

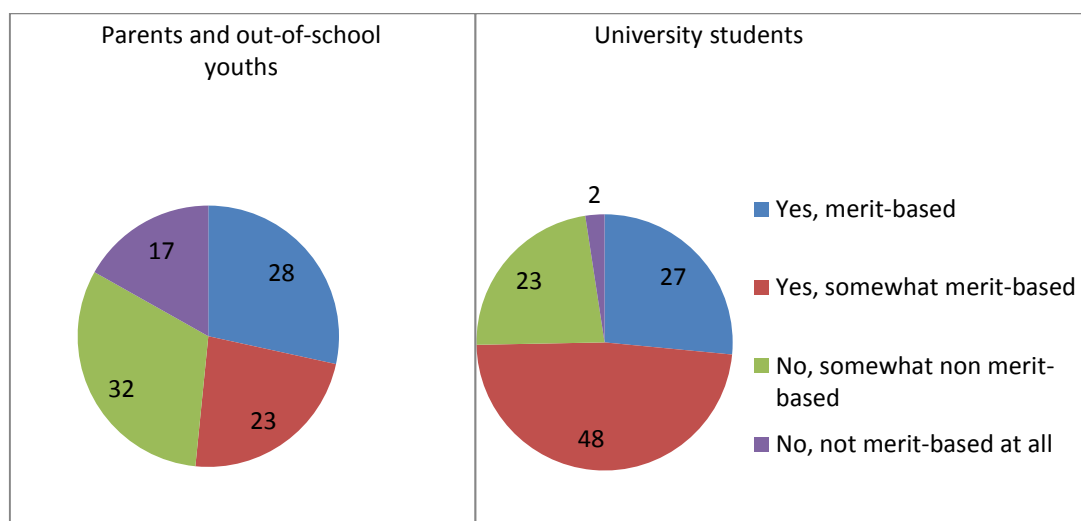
Transparency in the allocation of financial aid

High school students and parents both note that the financial schemes of budget and Presidential quota seats sometimes offer the *only* opportunity for high school students from poor

households to attend university. Tajikistan has a financing scheme for university students that consist of “budget” seats for state universities assigned on a merit basis, and Presidential quotas assigned to disadvantaged students from rural areas. The government finances about 40 percent of higher education students from its budget, a potentially high contributor to leveling the playing field. Although it is still small, the number of Presidential quotas since 2008/2009 has been increasing and, in 2011/2012, 3.4 percent of students in Tajikistan higher education institutions were awarded seats. Even though women are supposed to be given preference, according to the program criteria,²³ the gender distribution of the Presidential quotas is almost 50–50, with some annual variations. In terms of geographic distributions, students in the GBAO and Khatlon regions are over-represented, relative to the total number of students.

However, parents, out-of-school youths and university students expressed concern for the transparency and fairness of the budget-seat and Presidential quota selection processes. Only 51 percent of parents and out-of-school youths think that budget seat allocation is merit-based. In urban areas, where one could expect individuals to be better informed, given that they are closer to universities, perceptions are much worse than in rural areas: only 27 percent of parents and out-of-school youths say that the allocation of budget seats is merit-based, against 77 percent in rural areas (Figure 8). Perceptions among university students about the allocation of budget seats are better than among parents and out-of-school youths, but still negative: 25 percent of the these participants feel that the budget seat allocation is not based on merit.

Figure 8: Perceptions of Transparency in the Allocation of Budget Seats by Parents and Out-of-School Youths, and University Students (%)



Notes: For both samples, graphs show the response to the question: “Do you think that the allocation of budget seats is merit-based?” Parents and out-of-school youths sample has 2 missing observations out of 95 observations; university students sample has 1 missing observation out of 84 observations.

Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD).

High school students also displayed mixed perceptions about the allocation of budget seats and Presidential quota seats. Perhaps because they feel that they need them most, students in rural areas had lengthy discussions about budget and Presidential quota seats. A male high-school student in the poor 33 Micro District in Dushanbe described how both students awarded budget seats and tuition-paying students end up paying similar amounts to attend university:

²³ Decree of the Government of Republic of Tajikistan, #137, dated April 3, 2006, on the approval of rules of admission of students to the higher education institutes in accordance with the quota of the President of Tajikistan.

I think there is no difference between a state-funded seat and [the standard university tuition]. Many years ago, in order to obtain a state-funded seat, you paid a lot of money and then you could get that place. But when you pay for university yourself, you pay a certain amount of money each year for 5 years. At the end, both amounts will be the same. For example, in order to enter university with a state-funded seat, you had to pay USD 15,000. But the standard tuition was USD 3,000 a year for 5 years, so if you pay this sum every year, it will also be USD 15,000.

Several study participants refer to actual cases of unfairness in the allocation of budget seats and Presidential quotas. A male drop-out in Roshtqala District (GBAO) describes how he is not able to attend university because he lacks the money to pay for Presidential quota or budget seats: “We had no money and for Presidential quota and budget seats, you also have to pay.” Study participants mention cases of relatives, friends, and neighbors who paid to obtain a seat or who had not been granted a seat, despite demonstrating the qualifications and grades required:

Last year, a girl from our school who had really good knowledge applied for a Presidential quota to the Medical University...[She] took first place, but when they awarded the seat, they rejected her and said that the quota seat would be given to another girl. Later we heard that the mother of that girl had paid money for the quota seat.

– Female high school student, village in Roshtqala District, GBAO

I know the quotas are sold. For example, I know a person who bought one for his son who is brainless.

– Mother, peri-urban community in Vahdat District, RRS

I have only two ways of entering university. One is getting a budget seat and the other is a Presidential quota seat. I do not want to pay for them. I would like to deserve my place honestly.

– Female high school student, village in Roshtqala District, GBAO

Some participants comment that the lack of transparency cannot be generalized to all cases. For instance, in the poor 33 Micro District in Dushanbe, female high school students mention that good students obtain budget seats. And in a village in Roshtqala District (GBAO), a female high school student describes the case of a family where the children all study without bringing up unfair practices: “A lot of people get budget seats. They do not pay money.”

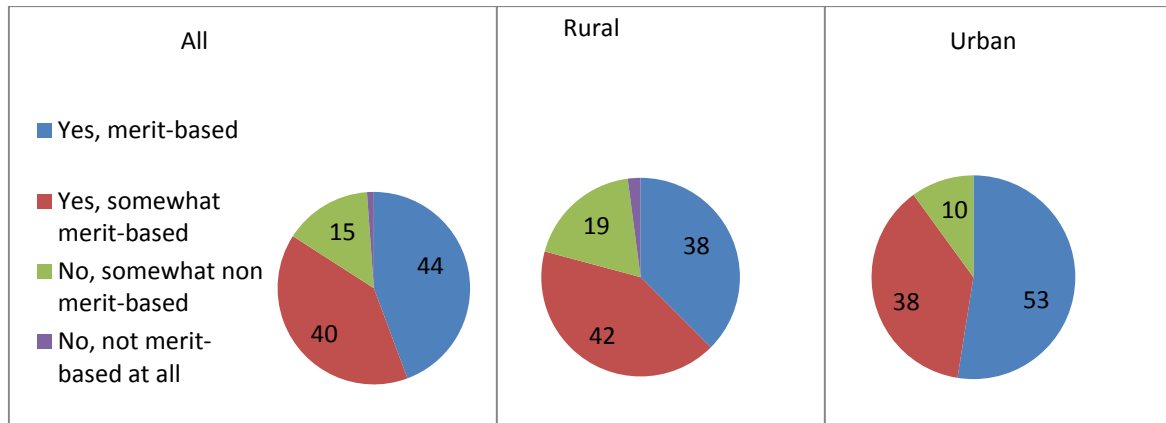
University professors, too, question the allocation of budget and Presidential quota seats. The university faculty interviewed in the study question the quality of the students who matriculate with budget or Presidential quota seats. They distrusted, more or less implicitly, the process through which these seats are allocated, since they should be merit-based. Two faculty members at the National University voiced some skepticism: “We also have budget places for skilled and talented students, but you can see the number of students who don’t wish to study and just want to get the diploma. How they entered this group, I don’t have any idea”; and “in terms of Presidential seats, I wonder a bit because there are some students who cannot read and write, but who enter university via Presidential seat. How they got this seat, I don’t know.” Another faculty member at Khujand State University described a process, also mentioned by some university students during the study pilot, where students from urban areas move temporarily to rural areas in order to obtain a Presidential quota seat:

One person from the city went to a remote district and studied there for only six months, in order to obtain a Presidential quota seat. At the same time, there was a girl from this district, who had difficult living conditions...Seeing this situation, I think that the allocation of quotas is not transparent. But every day, I also see the academic work of girls who enter university by their scholarship and those who enter by paying money. They study differently. Some 95 percent of quota students don’t have excellent knowledge. But they should have to be admitted on the basis of their scholarship.

Transparency in Olympiads

Many students feel that the national Olympiad competition – often the first national competition for a student - is not transparent: 14 percent of high school students stated that the competition is *not* merit-based and 37 percent believe that it is only somewhat merit-based (Figure 9). The Olympiad competition, where a good ranking is an important step in obtaining a budget seat, garnered significant interest from the high school student participants. One male student from the Roshtqala District (GBAO) claimed that he “knew cases where students came to the Olympiads with the prepared answers in their hand and cheated. That’s why I answered that it is somewhat merit-based, but not all the time.”

Figure 9: Perceptions that Grading of Olympiads Is Merit-Based, Among High School Students by Location



Notes: Graphs show response to the question about Olympiads: “Do you think that their grading is merit-based, which means that students who obtain the top scores are those who have the greatest knowledge?” There are 8 observations missing or had an unidentified code in the urban sample (out of 48 observations). There are 48 observations in the rural sample.

Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD).

Even university students, among whom a number won medals in the Olympiads, describe cases of winners who do not deserve to win. University students explained that grading may be transparent at the local level, but it becomes less transparent at higher levels:

Even if students have the greatest knowledge, it was useless to participate in Olympiads because the grading was unfair.

– Male student, Tajik State Pedagogical University

When the contest was in our school, everything was honestly run. However, when we went to the regional level, it was quite different, as the participants turned out to be either a relative of the committee members or some governmental official’s children and they were always given the places.

– Female student, Tajikistan State Medical University

My aunt’s son told me that he was offered first place in Olympiad by bringing money. He did not pay them and he took only third place in Olympiad.

– Female student, National University of Tajikistan

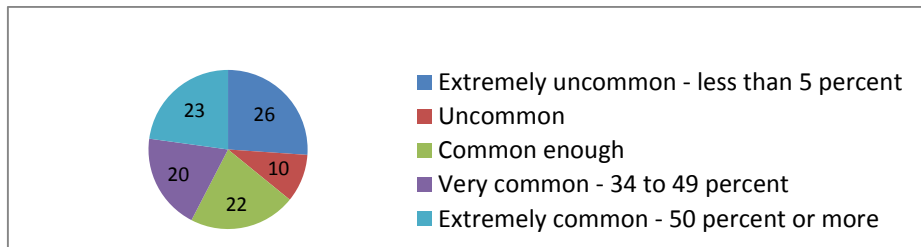
Reassuringly, some students also discuss the avenues for reporting irregularities and contesting the grading in the Olympiads. In the poor 33 Micro District in Dushanbe, both a female and a male high school student described successful cases in which students appealed decisions and won the appeal. One student relayed a case of a female student who expected to rank first, but did not: “She complained

about it and the investigation found that she did best on the test. I don't know how it happened that she didn't get first place before she complained, but it probably was because the other person paid for it.”

Informal payments and connections to get into university

While this study is not designed to assess the prevalence of informal payments in the education sector, numerous participants detail these common practices. With no prompting from focus group moderators, high school and university students and their parents regularly expressed frustration with students who use connections or buy their way to advance their education. A total of 60 percent of parents and out-of-school youths participating in the study believe that it is common or extremely common for students to make informal payments to get into university (Figure 10). Participant testimonies suggested that people in Tajikistan perceive a real trade-off between knowledge and money: if they can pay to pass a test, why study for it? The narratives from the focus groups revealed that these perceptions deeply undermine the climate of fairness and learning in the educational system.

Figure 10: Perception of Parents and Out-of-School Youths about Prevalence of Informal Payments for Admission to University



Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD).

Poor rural and peri-urban participants are more likely to think that informal payments to get into university are extremely common, which—regardless of practice—may constitute an additional barrier or concern in the decision to apply to university. In the poor peri-urban area of Vahdat District and the poor village in Roshtqala District, none of the parents answered that informal payments are extremely uncommon and only one parent says that informal payments are uncommon.²⁴ Many participants feel that even individuals with high-merit must make informal payments to universities for enrollment. It should be noted that parent participants in Vahdat District have children in university, so their views are not simply based on hearsay. As one of the women from Vahdat attested, “My husband finished high school with a gold medal, but he entered university with an informal payment.” A female drop-out in particular describes how she failed to get into university because she refused to make informal payments: “I wanted to pass the exam on my own merits, but my father wanted to make an informal payment because we could afford it. I refused; I did not want this amount of money to be paid for me. I told my father that I will pass the entrance exam myself, but I made a mistake and I was not accepted.” In this same village, suicide by students unable to make it to university is even mentioned. While suicide is likely extremely rare and likely linked to multiple causes, the fact that study participants even mention these cases and linked them to failure to get into university is very telling of the stakes and frustrations at play. One father in a village in Roshtqala District (GBO) is deeply disheartened by the corruption and hopes that the reform will help poor students:

[The UEE reform] will greatly help those who are from poor families who have the best knowledge. Before, it was so bad. For example, our neighbor's daughter had very good knowledge and was sure that she would be accepted at university. But due to corruption and bribery, they did not take

²⁴ It should be noted that parent participants in Vahdat District have children in university, so their views are not simply based on hearsay. By contrast, the perception in the study's relatively wealthier communities in Sughd (both the village in Qistervaz District and Khujand) held that informal payments are extremely uncommon.

her. She was so disappointed that she committed suicide. Today she would have gotten into university by her own capacity and others would not be to blame if she failed.

In relatively wealthier areas, views are more diverse, with parents taking a middle ground, although some of them, in the Sadbarg neighborhood in Dushanbe described informal payments at length. The perception in the study’s relatively wealthier communities in Sughd (both the village in Qistervaz District and Khujand) held that informal payments are extremely uncommon. Parents from Dushanbe City conveyed that they think informal payments are common but also decreasing. In the somewhat wealthier Sabdarg community in Dushanbe, study participants elaborated in great detail about the strong role of informal payments. All but one of the eight-member women’s focus group (mothers and out-of-school girls) indicated that informal payments are “common enough” and described the process: “I know that people don’t pay money directly, but through a mediator, a third person. He takes some of the money and then gives the rest to the teachers.”

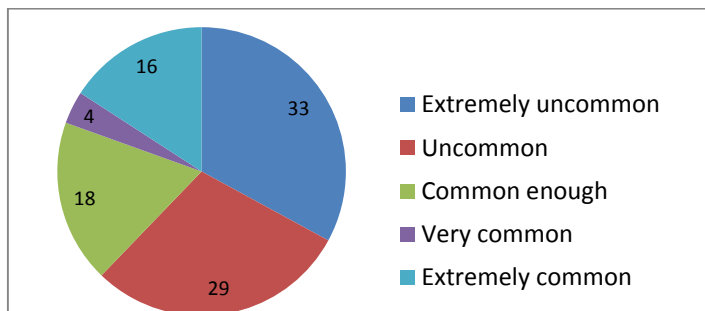
Perceptions of university students and faculty

Around 40 percent of university students believe it is common enough, very common, or extremely common for students to make informal payments to get into university (Figure 11). This figure is significant because these students experienced the admissions process. Indeed, the university students highlighted a gap between rules and what happens in practice.

Yes, we know that there is a law that says an applicant must enter university based on their own knowledge, but unfortunately this law does not work. Of course, many people pay money to get admitted. For example, if a department has only one place open and 5 people compete for it, the one who pays money will get the place.

– Male student, Tajik Slavonic University

Figure 11: Perception of University Students about Prevalence of Informal Payments for Admission to University



Notes: The graph shows the response to the question: “Let’s now turn to university, based on your experiences and what you have directly from university students or from their parents. How common is it to make substantial informal payments or gifts to university professors or university administrators? Again, by substantial informal payments or gifts we mean not just one small gift made once a year.”

Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD).

Some university faculty members acknowledged that using informal payments or connections to get into university is an issue. However, there is considerable variation in responses and participants had a good deal difficulty talking about this. Some university professors refused to talk about informal payments, citing its controversy, however, a few faculty members conceded the existence of informal payments to get into university. Participants justified these payments by discussing the existence of informal payments in high school: “I think the proportion is 1 out of 5 people [who make informal payments]” (Tajik State Pedagogical University); and “there are a lot of informal payments in high schools, so also in universities. Perhaps it occurs because of the low wages of teachers and professors, or perhaps to address needs in schools or universities” (National University of Tajikistan).

Some faculty members were defensive when discussing tutoring; this could be an indication that tutoring is not necessarily viewed as a way to improve learning but rather used by parents to create connections with university professors and facilitate the entry of their children into university. Another faculty member in the National University, who agreed that 1 in 3 parents think that informal payments are necessary to get into university, described the situation: “If we ask for money for tutoring, enrollees ask for a guarantee of entrance. They are paying money mainly to get into university, not for tutoring for their classes. The money we get for preparing a student is not too much; it is half of the professors’ salary.”

Box 2: University Students’ Comments about Informal Payments in a Focus Group Discussion

The National University in Dushanbe is a competitive university, which specializes in law. Female students reflected on their own experiences when they were in high school and preparing to enter university. They had intense discussions about the role of informal payments in access to university and some of them described their particular case or that of their classmates.

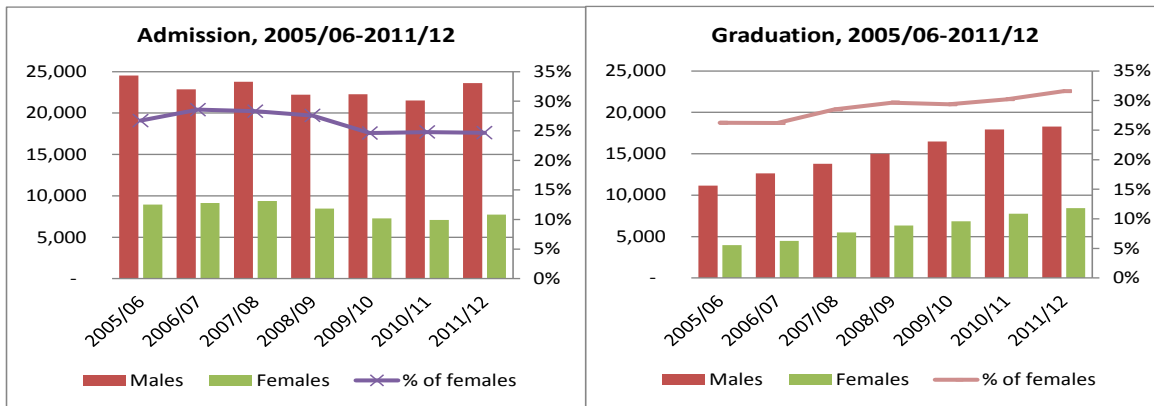
- In order to apply to the law school, one needs to pay both the official university fee and the “uncles (bribery)” fee. Thus, wherever you go, you have to pay.
- The only difference is you will pay everything at once.
- With the Presidential quota, I entered university, but only four of us got the quota. I did not have any relatives and I did not pay a penny, but I passed the exam. I cannot talk on behalf of others.
- I always talk with my classmates. In our group, we have 16 students...Nobody entered university or their department due to their real intellect. Everybody paid an additional fee.
- In our group, we have boys who did not pay an outside fee and, at the moment, they are studying very well.
- They told us exactly how much a seat in a department costs. They directly told us the price of a free university course and the normal university fees the regular fees normal for charged fees.
- I entered university without paying; however, my brothers entered university by bribing people.
- Parents surely know that their child is not able to enter university, know his capability and knowledge. That is why they seek the appropriate person and pay money to get to university. Most teachers cheat students. Sometimes a student can pass the entrance exams with his knowledge alone; however, the teachers get money as if they helped them.
- I remember the entrance exam. Sitting next to me was a girl who was very intelligent. Her grade in essay writing was 5; she answered all questions very well. She did not give money to anybody. She believed that she would pass by herself. As a result, she did not pass the entrance exam because she did not pay a penny, and that is why she entered the charged university faculty.

3.4. Quality of Secondary and Tertiary Education

Readiness for university

Lack of transparency and fairness in the university admissions process leaves few incentives for student and teacher excellence. Dropout rates in university are between 20 and 30 percent, indicating a lack of preparedness among university students (Figure 12). Graduation rates for women are better than for men. This may be due to the fact that women university students are a more select sample. Given the barriers they face to continue their studies after 9th grade, those women who matriculate at university may be both more motivated for studies and better supported by their parents compared to male students at university.

Figure 12: Admission and Completion Rates in Higher Education, 2005/2006–2011/2012, by Gender



Source: Graphs from World Bank (2014a). Original source: Ministry of Education (2012), *Statistical Collection Sphere Education: Republic of Tajikistan 2011–2012*.

Participants from every background voice frustration over the quality of high school education and students’ readiness for university. Only 50 percent of the university students in the sample feel well prepared for their university coursework and life, with the few students from rural areas feeling particularly unprepared. University students feel unprepared in terms of cognitive skills and study methods required at university. Students state that they are unprepared to conduct research and lack writing skills. A female student who grew up in a rural area says: “When I came to the university for the first time, the environment was completely foreign. We realized that the strategy for studying at the University absolutely differs from high school. We found it very challenging.”

University faculty members also feel that many students are not prepared for university, and some suggest that this may be due to lack of transparency in the admissions process. A professor in the State Pedagogical University repeated the same figure as the students: “Half of the students arrive at the University well prepared for their studies, but the other half is not so well set.” Another professor, in the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University notes that students “are absolutely not prepared for university. They are not ready for the credit and the scoring system. They are not ready to sit in a subject class for 90 minutes.” Professors mention that some students do not get into university based on their merits, but based on their connections or “uncles.” One professor at Khujand University commented that “the main difficulty that professors face is the illiteracy of some students who come to the university by the help of an ‘uncle’ or other ways. They don’t have a desire to learn. They only want a diploma.”

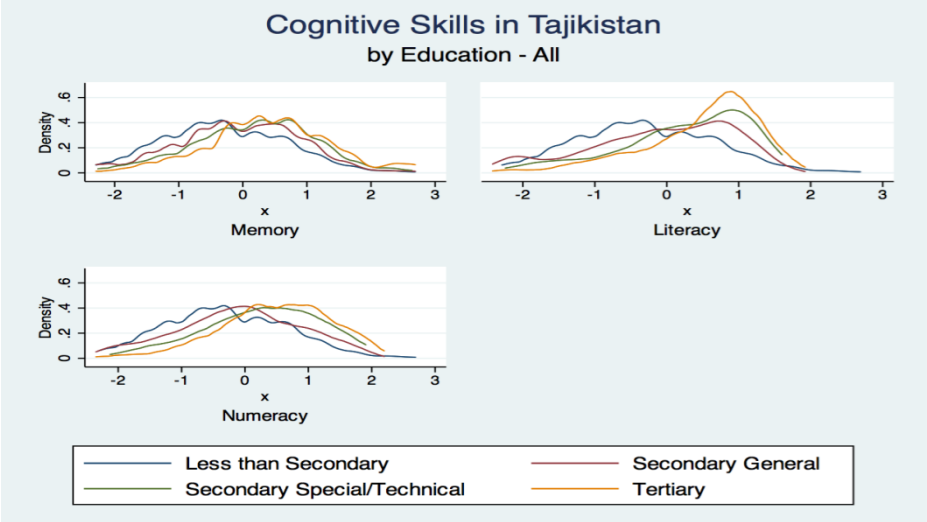
University staff indicated that support for students who struggle in university varies, with some universities offering free additional classes, tutoring departments, or private tutoring by university professors. The State Pedagogical University, for instance, has a department of tutoring “where every student can enroll by signing an agreement voluntarily.” On the other hand, at the Tajikistan National University, no additional classes seem to be offered, but “each faculty has societies (groups) twice in a month, where students can get answers for their questions.”

Skills development and quality of education in university

University education does not allow lagging students to catch up and acquire requisite skills. According to the results of a 2013 nationally representative household survey in Tajikistan, university graduates demonstrate a sizeable degree of variation in their cognitive skills. The cognitive skills of memory, literacy, and numeracy, examined in a recent World Bank report (Ajwad et al. 2014), show a large variation for a given level of education, indicating large disparities in the quality of education. In fact, while there is a positive correlation between cognitive skills and educational attainment, there is a large overlap between the distribution of skills of university graduates and high school graduates.

While the report acknowledges that this may be partly due to the quality of the measures of cognitive skills, it also indicates that possible issues exist both with the quality of education and with the selection of students at each level (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Cognitive Skills by Education Level

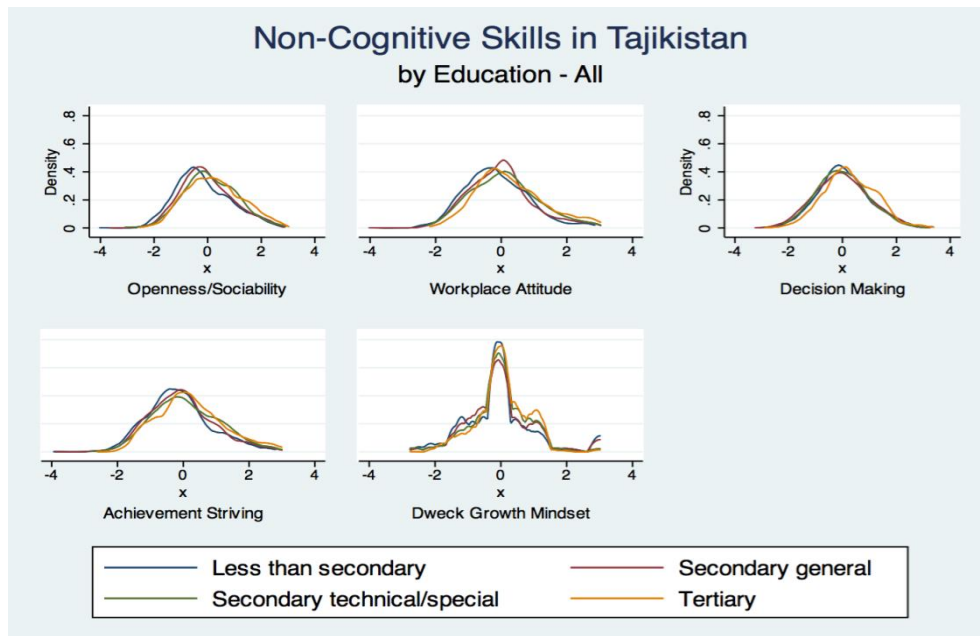


Note: Respondents aged 25–64.

Source: Ajwad et al. (2014), using World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013).

The socio-emotional skills of university graduates also show large degrees of variation. Socio-emotional skills measured in Ajwad et al. (2014) include openness/sociability, workplace attitude, decision-making, motivation to achieve, and growth mindset. The skills of openness/sociability, workplace attitude, and motivation to achieve are, on average, significantly greater for higher educated individuals. However, like cognitive skills, socio-emotional skills vary considerably within an education level (Figure 14). As Ajwad et al. (2014) points out, while the development of socio-emotional skills is complex and households and communities play a key role, the heterogeneity in socio-emotional skills also indicates that Tajikistan’s education system is not consistently developing these important skills.

Figure 14: Socio-emotional Skills by Education Level, 2013

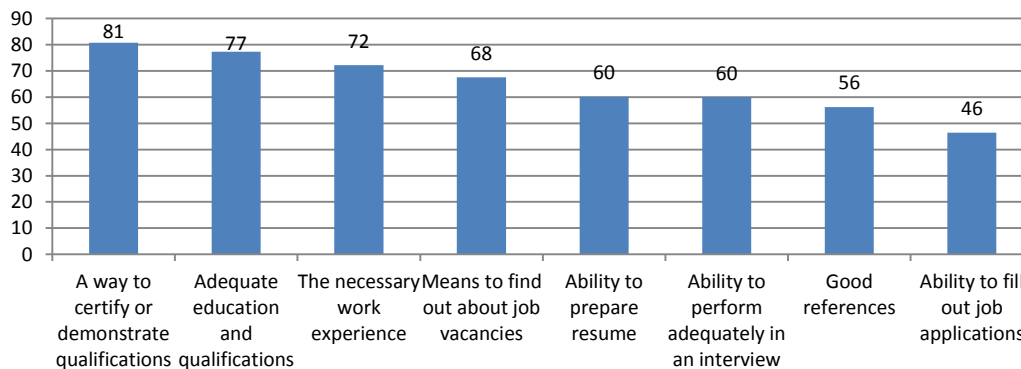


Note: Respondents aged 25–64.

Source: Ajwad et al. (2014), using World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013).

Not surprisingly, given this large variation in skills at a given education level, the major constraints reported by job-seekers are related to education: needing adequate education qualifications and being able to demonstrate them (Figure 15). In the same World Bank/GIZ household survey conducted in 2013, as many as 4 out of 5 individuals report having problems finding a way to certify their qualifications or demonstrate them, which speaks to the low signaling value of education. An almost equally high number report not having adequate education and qualifications, which can mean that they do not acquire enough education or can also mean that even individuals with degrees may not acquire the adequate skills for the labor market. It should be noted that firms complain that the workforce is inadequately prepared, although this proportion has decreased from 34 percent in 2008 to 14 percent in 2014 (World Bank 2014b).

Figure 15: Barriers to Getting Jobs, 2013



Source: Ajwad et al. (2014), using World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013).

Reflecting the findings of the World Bank/GIZ survey, in focus group discussions, some university students pointed out that a higher education diploma may not signal better qualifications and skills to employers. Several female students at the Medical University in Dushanbe explained their views:

- Most employers do not take even your degree into consideration.
- The main thing is the knowledge; if you have sufficient knowledge, the degree certificate is not so important.
- As far as I know, employers do not care how the employee acquired the degree. The main thing is the skill. For instance, when I wanted to teach English language...the employer did not even look at my certificate and the [staff] told me that it was not meaningful. They told me, “We are interested in your knowledge. Do you know the English language?” They started to speak English with me and then said I can start to work.

At the same time, most university students do not see their university education as providing an opportunity to acquire a broad set of cognitive and socio-emotional skills. They are primarily focused on working in their field of study and gaining field-specific knowledge. Most university students are focused on working in their profession or field of study. When asked what actions could help them find a job, most answered that knowledge of their field is key. Some students mention languages as valuable—studying Chinese, for instance—as well as computer skills. However, very few students brought up general skills, with the exception of female students from the Tajik State Pedagogical University, who added “good organizational skills” and “good creative skills,” and a female student at the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University, who included the need to be “sociable” and have “tolerance for stress.”

On the other hand, while university faculty members stressed knowledge in one’s field, they also insisted on a broad set of skills, including socio-emotional skills. Faculty members seem more aware of the general skills needed for a changing economy, as is Tajikistan’s. Several professors pointed to the importance of knowledge in one’s specialization; however, they also acknowledged socio-emotional skills that can be of use in any profession, such as “good behavior” and ability to “adapt quickly.” A professor at the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University included languages and computer skills, but also emphasized “qualities, such as flexibility and interpersonal skills.” Another professor at Khujand State University described how employers choose among several candidates using socio-emotional skills: “Now the young people will find work by having skills, such as speaking well, mental adeptness, and political resourcefulness. For example, one student is competing with another student. Both of them have good marks, but the person who is mentally sharper and more active in social works will get the position.”

3.5. Conclusion

Study participants clearly described a rather gloomy picture of barriers to accessing and completing higher education in Tajikistan, which is even acknowledged to some extent by university faculty. With this challenging backdrop, participants expressed hope that the reform can help improve fairness and equity in access to education.

4. Changes in Education Barriers after the UEE: Stakeholders' Expectations, Tutoring and University Studies

The new centralized university entrance exam must work honestly, not like the past years. Graders shouldn't change the students' essays, shouldn't pass students because they have connections, and should let students pass the exam honestly.

– Female high school student in peri-urban area in Vahdat District (RSS)

I like this system because now I have chance to apply. If I fail the exam, I will blame just me and nobody else. I know lots of other students who like this system.

– Out-of-school youth in a village in Roshtqala District (GBAO)

The majority of study participants voiced expectations that the UEE will help improve educational quality and equity in Tajikistan. In particular, participants anticipate that the more transparent and centralized entrance exam process will reward academic readiness and reduce opportunities for students to buy their way into university. Educators, parents and students all expressed optimism that the student preparation for the UEE exam will also improve student preparedness for university and improve the university matching process. Despite this positive outlook, participants have tempered expectations for change. Many feel that disadvantaged students and their families would face further setbacks as the UEE program unfolds due to widespread reports of stronger demand for private tutoring at the high school level. Additionally, university students reported on the high prevalence of tutoring and informal payment practices at the university level. While most of these students believe that corruption in admissions will decrease, participant responses are mixed about whether the reform will affect unfair practices within the university system.

4.1. Initial stakeholder response to and knowledge of UEE reform

More than 52,000 people registered for the UEE exam in July 2014, 30 percent more than the previous year. This high figure reflects the hope, captured fairly strongly across the sample groups, that the UEE reform will improve fairness and transparency in access to university. Many study participants appreciate how the centralized testing has reduced application costs and improved the openness of the university selection process, which they hope will better reward academic performance. A separate assessment of the UEE process also indicates greater public trust in the system.²⁵

This strong participation may reflect the effectiveness of the government's information campaign: most study participants indicated that they are well-informed of the reforms, with some disparities among parents. A total of 85 percent of high school students and 91 percent of parents knew about the new entrance exam, and high school students demonstrated detailed knowledge about exam implementation. Despite general awareness, parents are less informed, and many lack specific knowledge about exam implementation and fees.

High school students and parents perceive better access to information as one of the positive aspects of the new exam. They note that the universities previously provided very limited information about the student selection process. One male high school student in Vahdat District (RRS) comments that “this kind of information is not only for our benefit, but it is also beneficial to the students who come from the distant districts of the Republic. They did not have any information about how to submit the documents and how to take the exams.”

Many parents and high school students praised the new UEE application process for being easier and cheaper. In particular, costs associated with distance have been reduced. Applicants are able

²⁵ The separate assessment was conducted by the World Bank and 21st Century, a non-governmental organization.

to take the UEE in their current location and do not need to devote financial resources to travel long distances to the university they applied to, as practiced under the previous system.

The UEE reform is also seen as beneficial because it provides students with multiple choices to pursue their studies, creating a more efficient process for matching students and departments. Students greatly welcome the chance to apply to different universities and fields of study. Previously, students could only apply to one university department. High school students in a poor village in Roshtqala District in GBAO show particular enthusiasm about this aspect of the reform:

The impact, in my understanding, will be positive because, in previous times, students applied only to one faculty and chose one specialization. In case of failure, [the student] could only come back the next year. But this time, I have applied to several universities and that is a better opportunity for me.

– Male high school student

4.2. Implications of the UEE Reform for Efficiency

Of 46,000 students who took the UEE exams in July 2014 – out of the 52,000 who registered, around 16,000 students did not pass the minimum threshold to get into university, sending a strong signal that the exam is selective, including for fee-paying students. That the UEE has a minimum threshold sends a signal that even fee-paying students have to meet minimum learning standards.

High expectations that more qualified students will go to university

An overwhelming majority of high school students and parents from the study sample believe that the transparency of the new university entrance exam can positively affect the motivation and drive for learning. There is a sentiment among study participants that, until the establishment of the UEE, individuals getting into university through contract seats do not obtain their placement through merit. Students contrasted individuals getting in “with money” with the new UEE where students will get into university “with knowledge.” Students pointed out that those selected under the UEE system can be confident that they earned their admission because of academic merit, which will in turn enhance the environment for learning:

The students will feel a difference in the new environment. We all have the same chance to demonstrate our knowledge and abilities. If we fail the exam, it means our knowledge is not enough.

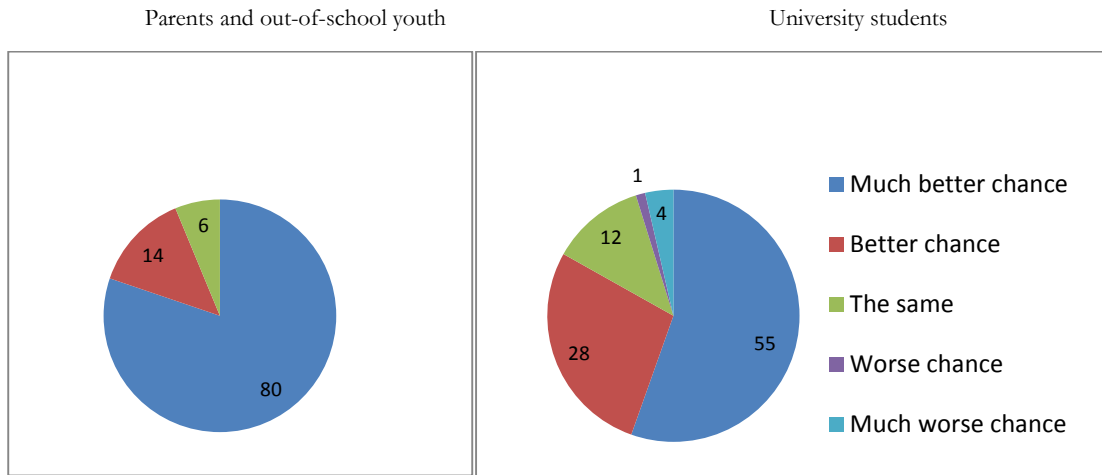
– Female high school student, village in Qistervaz, Sughd

All the exams will be graded by the test system and the results will be processed by the computer. Nobody can change the answers or the name of the student, as it was before.

– Female out-of-school youth, village in Qistervaz, Sughd

Indeed, most study participants—more than 9 in 10 high school students and parents, and more than 8 in 10 university students—strongly believe that the quality of students entering university will improve after the reform (figure 18). A total of 93 percent of parents and out-of-school youths, and 95 percent of high school students, agreed that students with greater knowledge, aptitude, or drive for learning will have a much better or better chance to enter university after the UEE reform, with very little variation across communities. At 83 percent, the proportion is slightly lower, but still high, among university students as well. University professors also anticipate improvement in the quality of students in university: “If in fact there really are deserving students, it will be much easier for professors to teach” (faculty member, Russia-Tajik Slavonic University).

Figure 16: Expectations for the Aptitudes of Students Admitted via the UEE, Noted by Parents and Out-of-school Youths, and University Students (%)



Note: There is 1 missing observation in each sample.
 Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD).

Improved preparation for entering university

Participants attribute improved quality of university students and teaching to a transparent UEE process that encourages rigorous student preparation. Many high school students, their parents, and high school teachers reported that university-bound students are actively studying for the exam. When students were asked to detail how their preparations differs from previous cohorts’, a female student in the poor 33 Micro District in Dushanbe replied bluntly: “The difference is that we are preparing for the tests.” Students clearly linked the transparency and fairness of the exam to their increased preparation:

Students prepare better this year since they are not able to make informal payments now. Additionally, they can choose up to 10 fields of study, which is why they have more opportunities of being accepted.

– Female high school student, 33 Micro District, Dushanbe

Last year, despite their bad preparation, some of my friends were sure that they would enter the university with their money. This year, students know about the national testing center and they have been preparing since November 2013 for the national testing center exams.

– Male high school student, 33 Micro District, Dushanbe

High school students reported receiving academic help from their high school teachers, including with free additional classes. Many students emphasized the important role teachers’ play in guiding them through the application and exam processes.

Each teacher wants his student to pass the new centralized admission exams. Therefore, most of the teachers run additional classes free of charge in order to prepare us.

– Female high school student, Sadbarg neighborhood, Dushanbe

We are very thankful for our teachers. They are very helpful. Our teachers bring us books, tests from Khorog, and other help. Some work with us after classes.

– Female high school student, village in Roshtqala District, GBAO

A step toward a better signaling value of education

Participants feel that the reform will improve the signaling value of education. Participants feel that the reform will increase employers' confidence in university graduates knowledge and skills. Some participants also mention that this will be beneficial to their job-seeking. In the words of a female university student at Tajik State Pedagogical University, "if individuals pass the new centralized exam and become students, it means that they indeed have good knowledge and will be good specialists, who are confident in their knowledge and possibilities. Whenever they seek a job, the employer will be satisfied with them." High school students are particularly optimistic about the reform's contributions to their job prospects:

It will help the students in the future. It enhances the level of their knowledge, when all the students pass their exams based on their merit. In the future, after graduating from the university, they will be recognized for the level of their knowledge by the society.

– Male high school student, peri-urban community in Vahdat District, RRS

A father from the middle class neighborhood that feeds into the Khujand high school argues that the UEE reforms is expected to enhance his country's prosperity. Positive change will occur, he posited, because university students will be "selected for their capacity and knowledge...if they study well and work hard, someday they will be part of the society and be able to contribute to the betterment of it." In similar fashion, educators, parents, and students also anticipate that the UEE will help raise the reputation of Tajikistan's universities and lift employer confidence in the qualifications of their graduates.

4.3. Implication of the UEE Reform for Equity in Access to University

In my opinion, if exams take place with transparency, it must break the relationships-connections element.

– Mother, Khujand (Sughd)

I hope that one day justice will prevail and worthy students will study at universities—that those entrants who actually deserve to learn will be admitted, and that there will be fewer of those (meaning teachers) who sold their conscience.

These teachers are letting into universities stupid students, while those who actually have good knowledge, who might be good specialists, remain behind.

If we graduate good, competent, knowledgeable professionals, the future of our republic will be in safe hands. No more bribery or corruption in education. I am glad that some sort of work in this direction has already been done and that corruption of our university will end."

– Professor, Russian-Tajik Slavonic University

Thriving tutoring industry

As part of the increased preparation for the UEE, there are widespread reports of increased tutoring, which poses an unintended and potentially harmful consequence of the reform for equity. Across the communities visited, participants agree that high school tutoring is becoming more prevalent in response to the exam.

Almost half of high school student participants receive private tutoring, with little variation across geographic location or gender. The proportion of students receiving private tutoring is substantially higher in this study than the number (8 percent) collected in the nationally representative survey conducted in 2013. This discrepancy is likely due to the fact that the qualitative study targeted individuals who plan to attend university.

Tutoring is already widespread in high schools according to current university students: 70 percent of university students in the qualitative assessment report taking private tutoring in high school, although (as previously mentioned), tutoring may be a way to make informal payments.

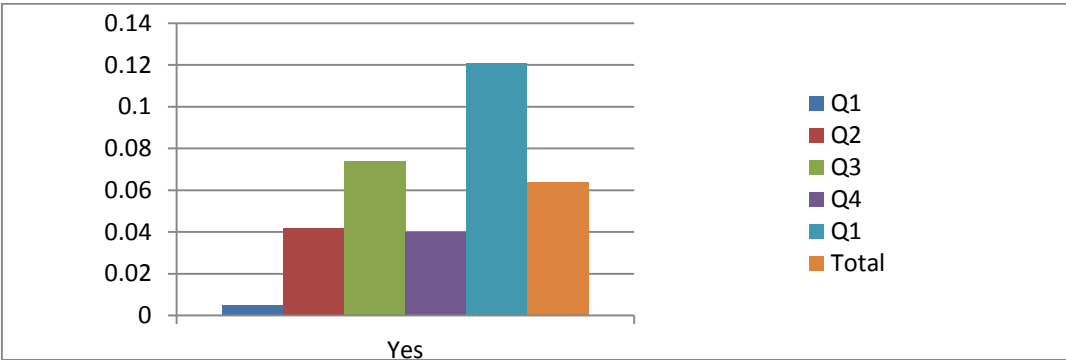
Students enrolled in university gave accounts of their preparation, although it seemed that it came late, mostly during the summer prior to entering university, and hence may have been rather a way to establish connections with universities rather than improve preparedness for exams. As a faculty member at the National University mentions, private tutoring might also be a way to channel informal payments.

Interestingly, study participants do not necessarily perceive tutoring as potentially harmful to equity, likely because it calls for effort on the part of students. A mother from the poor village sampled in Roshtqala District (GBAO) does not perceive the need for tutoring as a financial barrier to access university: “The number of private tutoring classes will rise. Now people do not rely on the thickness of their purse, but on the knowledge level.”

Yet, such high rates of tutoring invariably raised concerns for students from families that may be unable to afford the fees; and data from the World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013) shows that private tutoring increases with household consumption.

Even if transparent, private tutoring is potentially harmful for equity and points out the lack of preparation by standard high school classes. Some study participants mention that tutoring necessitates increased spending on education. A female student at Tajik State Pedagogical University, from a poor community, described her situation: “When I studied at high school, all the students wanted to take private classes, but in reality, only those who had money could take these classes. The people without money couldn’t go—they had the desire, but not the opportunity.” Data from the World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey (2013) shows that private tutoring increases with household consumption (figure 19). Less than one percent of students from the lowest quintile receive private tutoring, versus twelve percent of students from the top quintile.

Figure 17: Private Tutoring among High School Students by Consumption Quintile, 2013



Source: Authors’ calculations using World Bank/GIZ Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey 2013. Results shown are weighted with sampling weights.

Expected changes in informal payments to access university

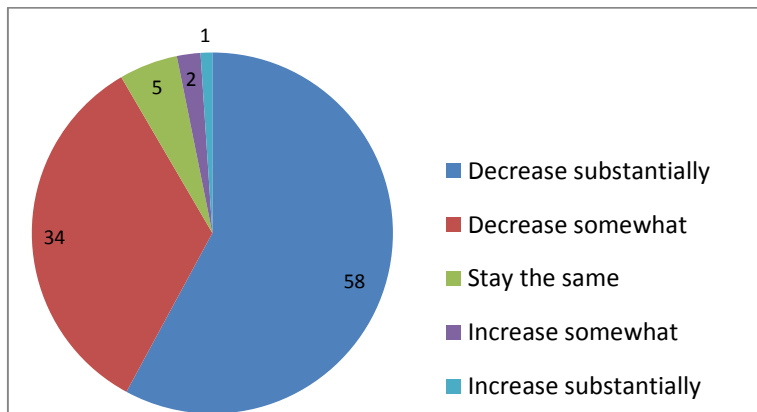
In recent years, my relatives told me that before entering university, I should make informal payments. But we are lucky this year, as they will be eliminated.

– Female high school student, Khujand

Slightly more than half the parents and out-of-school youths participating in the study think that informal payments to get into university will decrease substantially after the UEE reform, and another third think that they will somewhat decrease, with less optimism in urban areas (figure 20). Parents and out-of-school youths participating in the study expressed high hope that increased

transparency and fairness in the administration of the UEE will help to discourage the practices of making informal payments and using connections to be admitted to university. Urban areas are more skeptical than rural areas: 1 in 5 parents and out-of-school youths in urban areas believe that informal payments will remain the same or increase, while this proportion is only 3 percent in rural areas. In the poor urban 33 Micro District in Dushanbe, a mother comments, “I think that the new entrance exam will affect the fairness and transparency of studies at university during the first year. However, people will find a way of making informal payments for getting into university in later years.” One father in the same community openly mentions that he will make informal payments or use connections to help his child get into university: “I will try my best for my child to get him what he wants to get, no matter what. Even if his level of his knowledge does not allow him to pass, I will try to make informal payments or go through some connection to help him enter his desired field of study.”

Figure 18: Parents’ and Out-of-School Youths’ Expectations of the New UEE’s Effect on Informal Payments for Access to University



Note: Response to the question: How do you think the new centralized university entrance exam will affect informal payments for admissions to universities?

Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD).

While they show more optimism than parents in urban areas, parents and out-of-school youths in rural study sites have very rich discussions about the changes to informal payments, confirming the importance of the reform for them: some express hope while others express skepticism (figure 21). This interest likely reflects the specific challenges faced by rural participants in accessing higher education, including need for financing and issues of distance. Several fathers in the peri-urban Vahdat District (RRS) mention their optimism that informal payments for budget seats will decrease: “Students with greater knowledge will have a better chance to apply for budget seats and get them for free”; and “poor families will see the most positive change. Now their children have the opportunity to study at universities, whereas before they did not.” However, other fathers had their doubts:

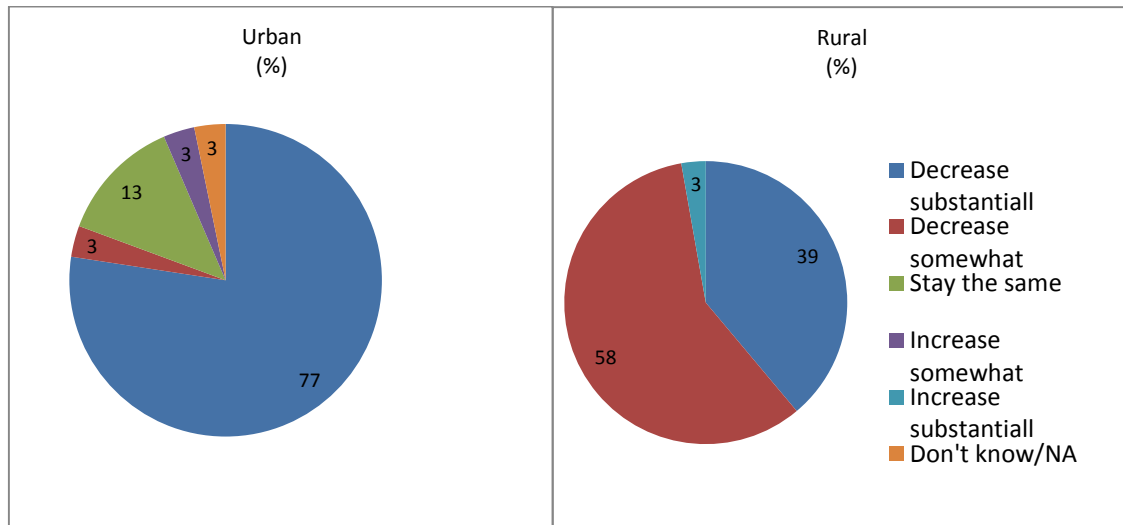
This new testing center was already organized in Russia and we found out that informal payments still occur there. But we believe and hope that in new centralized entrance exam center they will take into account those mistakes.

– Father, village in Qistervaz District, Sughd

On one hand, I think it will not be that much fairer. Why? There are fewer students with good knowledge than those who are not well prepared. So what will they do if they do not get a passing mark? They will again pay. I think it will be like this, but let’s see.

– Father, village in Roshtqala District, GBAO

Figure 19: Parents' and Out-of-School Youths' expectations of the UEE's Effect on Informal Payments for Access to University, by Location



Note: Graph shows the response to the question: “How do you think the new centralized university entrance exam will affect informal payments for admissions to universities?”

Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD).

High school students were not asked a direct question about informal payments or informal ways to enter university.²⁶ Nevertheless, they also express optimism about the reform’s impact on informal payments with particular emphasis on how it may help poor and female students. High school students in a village in Qistervaz District (Sughd) are optimistic about the effects for children from poorer backgrounds: “it’s good for children from poor families. In recent years they didn’t have money and couldn’t enter, but this year they will enter by their own knowledge.” In the poor peri-urban community of Vahdat District (RRS), girls think that lifting the financial barriers would benefit their education prospects. They commented that “for example, in order to enter the National University, [students] needed a lot of money and parents didn’t let girls study and didn’t let them continue school education after ninth grade. This [UEE] is a possibility for girls to study”; and “the president is thinking about us because before girls like me even didn’t try to apply because of lack of money.”

However, like adults, high school students are cautious about the durability of the UEE reform’s initial fairness. Some high school students in the Sadbarg neighborhood of Dushanbe expressed a sentiment that, while the system will work the first year, individuals will find ways to circumvent it in the future: “This year perhaps it will work well. I mean the admission process will be transparent. But next year, I think the system of giving money again will increase. As the proverb says, the Tajik people will find the way.” Others feel that the custom of using connections or making informal payments is so entrenched that it may be hard to change:

I think that even now, with the new centralized university entrance exams, many students will still pass if they have good contacts or money. Not as many, but a few. Because, in our country, it has become—how do I put it—the rule perhaps, so it is not easy to stop it at once.

– Male high school student, Sadbarg neighborhood, Dushanbe

More broadly, despite the general view that the new exam will lead to more equal opportunities, participants believe that economic barriers to attending university will persist. Students feel that barriers will remain for the most economically disadvantaged, as a male high school student residing in a

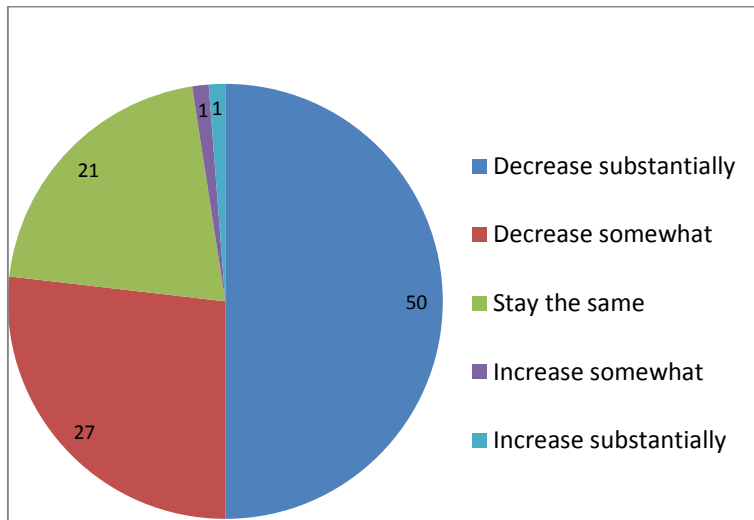
²⁶ The high school students were simply asked whether they think a centralized university entrance exam is a good change or a bad change, and why.

poor neighborhood in the 33 Micro District in Dushanbe describes: “I know about the UEE center and I have enough knowledge to take the National Testing Center exams, but it is still not possible for me. I won’t have time to study at university because I must help my father after classes.”

In university, tempered optimism for the reform is expressed: 1 in 4 students say that informal payments to enter university would remain the same (Figure 20); professors expressed optimism for the reform to improve access to university and saw benefits for the reputation of universities. A faculty member at the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University expressed a common sentiment that the reform will be beneficial for poorer students, who “will have more chances for admission this year.” A professor at Tajik National Medical University commented that his university’s reputation will improve because the reform decreases university association with informal payments:

We are very happy that this new system will be instituted because, for several years, the name of the Medical University was on the “black list.” The reason was the obvious use of informal payments for entrance, but the university itself changed last year’s test system in order to avoid this problem. But people still think that there are informal payments in our university. So, we are happy that this new centralized entrance exam will solve all these problems.

Figure 20: University Students’ Expectations of the New UEE’s Effect on Informal Payments to Access University (%)



Note: 2 missing observations
 Source: Tajikistan Education Qualitative Data (TEQD).

4.4. Implications of the UEE Reform for Transparency and Equity during University Studies

[University professors] will take informal payments from students as they did it before.

I think that, due to the university entrance exams, professors will not be able to get informal payments for studies at university because they will deal with students who have a better knowledge, aptitude, and drive for learning.

However, I don’t think [things will change much]. There are students who have better knowledge, yet teachers still ask them to make informal payments. There are students who are knowledgeable and yet they make informal payments.

– Discussion by mothers and female out-of-school youths, 33 Micro District, Dushanbe

A key question regarding the UEE reform is its impact on universities' income. The UEE reform may affect universities' income in two ways. First, given the greater number of students failing to pass the UEE, admission will decrease (i.e., unqualified students cannot buy a seat if academic merit is the standard), which will decrease universities' revenue. Second, if the exam successfully increases fairness and transparency of access to higher education, it will decrease the amount of income received from informal payments. It is therefore a concern that universities will seek out other means to make up for the loss of income, including increasing the prevalence of informal payments *during* university studies.

High school students: Cautiously optimistic about better selected students leading to better behavior in university

A total of 2 out of 3 high school students believe that the reform will lead to positive changes in university, with far more hope among students in rural areas. 9 out of 10 rural high school student participants believe that transparency and fairness will improve a lot, versus less than 1 in 2 urban high school students. This discrepancy may be due to descriptions, in urban areas, of pervasive informal payment and connection practices. Male high school students in the Sadbarg neighborhood of Dushanbe worry about having to make payments once in university: “You can get transferred to another specialization by paying money or by getting help from somebody”; and “you can transfer to another specialization through your relatives or friends.”

High school students' hopes for improvements in transparency during university studies rest on the hope that better-prepared students (selected via the UEE) will be less inclined to buy their way through university. Several female high school students in a village in the poor Roshtqala District (GBAO) commented on the potential positive impacts of the UEE in university thanks to the increased drive for knowledge of students admitted after the reform: “Good students will come to university and they will study well without any payments. Nowadays [before the UEE], students do not study and they blame professors for that”; and “most students blame the teachers at university, however they are not doing well themselves. They pay money in entrance exams and they always continue to pay during university study.” The high school students with positive expectations about the UEE reform assumed that only students who fail their exams make informal payments in university, leading to their hope that the incidence of such students will decrease with the UEE. A male out-of-school youth in the 33 Micro District of Dushanbe is surprisingly honest: “All of us, sitting here and blaming corruption. However, it is our own fault. The corruption entirely comes from us, and we let it continue because we don't have enough knowledge.”

University students: Less optimistic about the UEE reform bringing change to the status quo during university studies

University students were less optimistic than high school students: 1 in 5 university students believe that informal payments in university will be unchanged, and 1 in 4 feel they will somewhat decrease. Unlike the high school students, university students in the sample were asked directly if they believe informal payments in university will change after the UEE reform.²⁷ Their less optimistic view may be due to being asked specifically about informal payments, but it may also be that they are more familiar with university practices and expect more inertia.

²⁷ High school students were not asked direct questions about informal payments. Instead they were asked whether they think that transparency and fairness would improve.

The situation described by university students showed a mix of students initiating payments and professors becoming very demanding during exams for the purpose of receiving payments. When asked who initiates payments, the discussions among students revealed a mix of payments initiated by students failing exams, as well as teachers forcing students to pay by giving low grades (box 3). Students also described group payments, but it is unclear whether these informal payments occur only as a result of a demand by students who fail their exams in university.

Box 3: Who Corrupts First—the Student or the Professor?

Across the study sample of university students, they described various scenarios for informal payments, including several in which professors manage to make students pay.

At the Tajik State Pedagogical University, female students recounted how teachers initiate the payment discussion: “At university, teachers can demand money directly from the student”; and “give me a certain amount of money—this is what teachers say today.” At the same time, the young women also mentions students who “don’t want to study and will pay to pass an exam,” as well as “those who have enough knowledge and can pass their exams without any problems.”

Their male counterparts at the same university described the various scenarios:

- *The students themselves [initiate payments], to be exact. If a student studies properly, there is no need for him to pay professors. But if he doesn’t, then he has to.*
- *Students pay professors after the exam, as I have noticed.*
- *There was a professor who told me himself to pay him money if I wanted to get a grade.*
- *We shouldn’t blame professors. It’s the fault of those students who don’t study properly or don’t have the wish to study.*
- *Payments are made both collectively by students and separately by each student.*

Female students at the National University also saw variety in student and teacher behavior:

- *No, in our group, the attitude of teachers toward all the students was the same.*
- *It is impossible to generalize about teachers: some sell the answer keys, some do different things.*

Male students at the State Medical University made general observations about informal payments:

- *If there are 18 people in a group and just one passes by paying illegally, that would affect others as well.*
- *Sometimes if you pass exams without paying, other students laugh at you and make fun of you.*
- *No, there are others in the group who respect those students who never pay.*

University students and professors: Multiple opportunities for informal payments during university studies could substitute for lost income

It is possible that the decrease in a university’s power to select students, with an associated decrease in informal payments to get access to university, can increase informal payments at other levels as substitutes. University students note informal payments are more likely during university studies than in the admissions process.

Some study participants say that the UEE reform means a shift in power away from university faculty and a decrease in income for them. University students mention that the informal incomes of university professors will decrease with the reform. “The teachers of National University now cannot earn enough money,” commented a female student there. A male student at the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University notes “a university lecturer who [currently] takes money from admissions applicants will be left without informal income.” A university professor at the Tajik State Pedagogical University contrasted

the UEE process to the earlier situation, in which university professors played a central role: “In the previous years, the selection of the candidates for the university depended so much on the university professors. But now, the role of secondary school teachers in entering the university is very big.”

Although the demand for private tutoring to prepare for university seems to be increasing, it is unclear whether university professors are benefitting. In alignment with previous practice, some high school students are preparing for the UEE by hiring university professors as tutors. A staff member at the Tajik State Pedagogical University notes that “[students] definitely are going to prepare with university professors for [the new exam]. We have a tutoring department and we offer pre-exam preparatory courses, which last three and six months.” However, as the universities play a less important role in selecting their students, the increased demand for private tutoring may not compensate for the demand for tutoring from the specific university that students planned to attend before the UEE reform. Some university professors saw the reform as a threat to hiring university professors for private tutoring. Instead, high school teachers are expected to gain from the increased demand for tutoring. An out-of-school youth from the peri-urban community in Vahdat District (RRS) says that “[...] most of the questions in the entrance test are taken from the school syllabus. That is why school teachers will open more tutoring classes and earn more money.”

There are already several opportunities for informal payments in university: in order not to fail exams and to obtain high grades. A student at the Medical University comments, “Many students have a lot of absences—even missing as much as 90 percent of their classes—but they make informal payments and continue their studies.” While the poor-performing students may pay to avoid failing a class, other students may make informal payments to ensure they maintain high grades, keep their budget seat, or obtain a place in a desired department or specialization:

When we took the exams orally in the past, it was very difficult. All the professors had a list of the students’ names who they supported and also a list of the students who gave money to them. Also the individual professor giving the exam had his own plan of who he would give the “excellent” and “good” marks to. So, accordingly, the professors already knew who was going to get “excellent” marks. Since all the “excellents” were sold, the students who had good knowledge got lower marks.

– Female student, Tajik State Medical University

University students describe how they chose their specialization based on the informal price of admittance to that specific department. A female student at the Medical University mention that rates of informal payments are different depending on the specialization: “We need to choose a specialty that does not require money, like a resuscitation specialist or a psychiatrist. There are only five fields that do not require informal payments.” A student at the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University says, “Rates [of informal payments] depend on the prestige of the faculty.”

University professors: Divergent views about continuation of informal payments

Professors say that those students who do not perform well make informal payments, but they recognized that there is an overall environment in which informal payments are the norm. When asked about challenges at his university, a professor at the State Pedagogical University says that those students who do not perform well offer bribes to university professors: “I think the biggest challenges are the poor level of the students’ knowledge and their poor study behavior. It affects the faculty so much, when the student does not attend classes regularly or does not study, in addition to bribing the university faculty in order to pass exams. So, the professors who take bribes from this kind of student for a good grade create a negative reputation for all the faculties of the university.” This same professor recognized, however, that informal payments, even if initiated by parents, create a vicious cycle once the professor accepts: “The low level of a student’s knowledge requires their parents to make informal payments, in order to provide their children with education. The professors who accept bribes from the parents of the students only encourage more parents to do it.”

Others acknowledged that professors are able to pressure students into making informal payments. A university faculty member at the National University described his own experience as a student: “There were some professors you had to pay, whether you had studied with them or not.” Another faculty member had a more nuanced view: “Some of the teachers are very honest and some give out marks for a certain amount of money, and we can’t hide that...but mostly it is the students’ fault, I think. Some students do not study at all, they just attend classes. Others don’t even go to class, so what shall the professor do with this kind of student? Even the honest teacher must take some amount of payment, because there is no other way. He spends his time with this student, but this student does not care about exams.”

Last, some university professors tended to either deny that informal payments occur at university or say that the practice has decreased substantially. Some stressed that the situation has improved considerably since the reform, that informal payments used to prevail, but they have decreased or disappeared altogether. “In that time, students did not even attend classes, but they still passed their tests and exams. Today, this kind of thing almost does not exist at our university,” commented a faculty member at the Tajik National University. Another at the Tajik State Pedagogical University says that “the incidence of these practices [informal payments after students are enrolled] is very low. Previously we saw a lot, but it has decreased now” And one professor claimed that no informal payments took place at all: “At our university, there are no informal payment practices. At, other universities, I cannot tell.”

5. Conclusion

The implementation of the university entrance exam (UEE) in July 2014, with broader reforms supported by the World Bank, indicates that Tajikistan's education system is undergoing **potentially transformative change**. With the goal of improving the quality and equity of higher education, the government of Tajikistan adopted this system to promote more fairness and transparency in access to university. A previous decentralized application process that was opaque and under the discretion of each university has been replaced by a highly centralized process. Now, all applicants take a single centralized exam administered throughout the country at a low cost, and may apply to up to ten universities, fields of study and type of funding in a given year.

Many participants have high hopes for the reform and feel that it will improve access to highly-qualified but disadvantaged applicants who will be admitted based on merit instead of ability to pay informal payments. In fact, almost 90 percent of parents and out-of-school youth participants feel that informal payments to get into university will decrease.²⁸ And this view seems to be changing behavior; high school students commented that they are preparing intensely for the university entrance exam, and numbers indicate a 30 percent increase in the number of university applicants from 2013 to 2014.

5.1. Moderate Expectations in the Midst of Significant Barriers

However, expectations sparked by the reform are tempered by significant skepticism, especially in the urban areas and among university students. A noteworthy number of study participants, namely university students and those in urban areas, believe that informal payments will stay the same or increase after the reform. The skepticism among this group carries particular weight, as they are most knowledgeable about university practices.

Furthermore, significant geographic and socio-economic barriers to access higher education in Tajikistan still exist. School enrollment data shows increased inequality beginning from secondary education: only 13 percent of general secondary students are from the bottom quintile of consumption, while 25 percent are from the top quintile. The difference grows starker in higher education, where the proportion of students from the top consumption quintile is eight times higher than the bottom quintile. Several study participants elaborated the geographic barriers to higher education.

Barriers to higher education have been increasing over time, with participants often citing financial limitations as the main constraints. Tajik students today are twice more likely to stop their studies at the end of mandatory education than their older counterparts. The share of men and women with less than a secondary level of education is more than twice as high among 25 to 34 year olds compared to 35 to 45 year olds. Both female and male student focus groups signaled financial constraints as the main barrier (29 and 39 percent, respectively).

Gender norms that encourage gender inequality are of further concern, with one in three women stopping their studies before finishing secondary education. Study participants named marriage or expectations to marry, parents' expectations of lower returns on daughters' education and mobility restrictions as the main additional barriers faced by female students.

5.2. Risks and Blind Spots

Going forward, the reform presents several new risks and blind spots. For instance, the UEE reform places more weight on the quality of high school education because students who fail the exam

²⁸ Significantly or somewhat

cannot gain admittance into university. As a result, the demand for tutoring is likely to increase, threatening equity, as some students cannot pay. As competition for good high schools – those that are more successful at the UEE – increases, informal payments could shift to access these high schools. At the same time, to compensate for lost income from admission, informal payments could increase in university. University students already mention multiple situations for informal payments: in order to not fail, to get good grades, or to choose (or change) a specialty. They also described how some professors are known for giving artificially low grades in order to force students to pay them.

Also, while the reform improves overall transparency and fairness, it does not impact many of the financial barriers and social norms that disproportionately affect women. A few female participants note that the reform may be particularly beneficial to them because it decreases financial barriers which work disproportionately against women: gap in education outcomes between men and women is even larger in poorer households. However, gender norms may present themselves in new ways, for instance, public tutoring classes may be held at a time or place that is considered unsafe for female students to attend.

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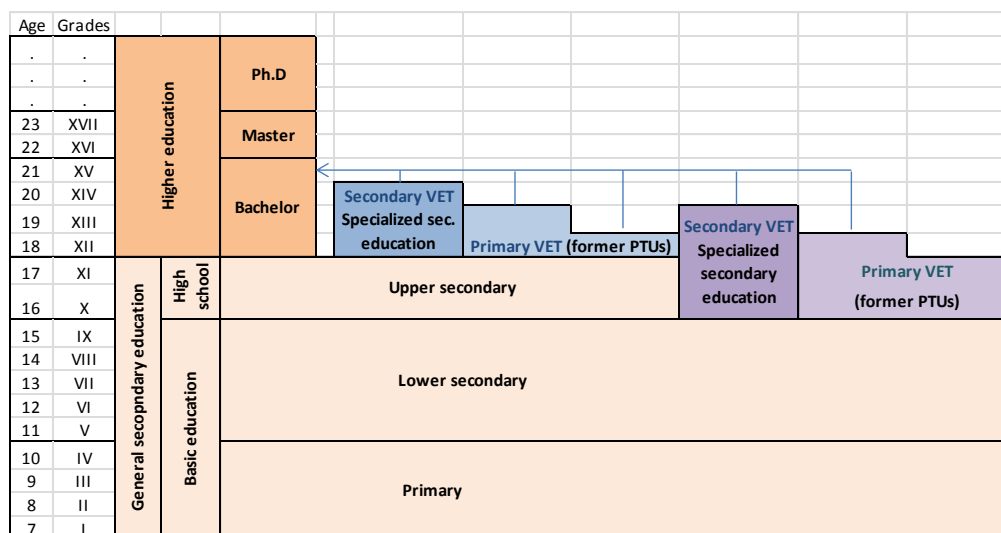
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Appendix A: the Tajikistan Education System

Figure 21: Tajikistan's Education System



Source: World Bank (2013), *Tajikistan Policy Notes on Public Expenditures*, Policy Note No. 3, Review of Public Expenditures on Education.

Table 4: Education System in Tajikistan, 2012–2013

Education level	No. of students	%	No. of schools
Preschool (3–6 year olds)	–	–	–
Kindergartens	74,500	4	508
Early learning centers	14,860	1	707
General education	1,712,900	85	3,813*
Professional technical educational institutions	23,238	1	67
Secondary professional	42,800	2	50
Higher education	150,100	7	34
<i>Total</i>	<i>2,002,229</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>5,144</i>

Notes: The table includes private schools which consist of only around one percent of general as well as primary and secondary professional education. There is only one private university.

*This number includes 528 primary schools (grades 1–4), 682 basic schools (grades 1–9), 2,584 complete secondary school (grades 1–11), and 19 special needs and evening schools. These are not broken out above because the types of school and grade level of students do not match each other.

Sources: The Statistical Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan (<http://www.stat.tj/english/home.htm>); and the Ministry of Education for ELC (for 2012–2013).

Appendix B: the *Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey*²⁹

The Tajikistan Jobs, Skills, and Migration Survey was conducted between May and September 2013. It collected comprehensive information not typically captured by traditional household surveys and is representative at the national, regional (Oblast), and urban/rural levels. The sample size of the core questionnaire is 3,300 households with a total of 20,142 individuals. Depending on the household, one or two individuals per household were randomly selected to partake in the skills questionnaire. The second skills questionnaire sample consists of 4,892 individuals (Ajwad et al., 2014).

The survey comprises a core questionnaire and a skills questionnaire. The core questionnaire contains modules focusing on: education, employment, migration, health expenditure, remittances, government transfers, financial services, subjective poverty, housing conditions, and household expenditures. The core questionnaire concludes with the random selection of a household member aged 15 to 64 who is not a current migrant (the selection is based on a random number table or Kish grid) to be the subject for the skills questionnaire. The skills questionnaire contains detailed modules on labor and work expectations, migration and preparation for migration, language skills, and technical skill training. A unique aspect of the survey is the battery of cognitive and non-cognitive questions which helps to test a respondent's ability. The cognitive skills module is based on a recent instrument developed for a similar survey in Bulgaria. The non-cognitive test modules of the skills questionnaire are based on World Bank Skills Toward Employment and Productivity (STEP) surveys. The skills modules were developed with the support of a multi-disciplinary panel of experts in psychology, skills assessment, education, and labor markets

The socio-emotional skills used in this report were constructed using survey questions covering 11 scales, and were then aggregated into 4 factors using factor analysis. The socio-emotional skills cover the Big Five personality traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (or emotional stability)—, grit (which is a facet of conscientiousness), hostility bias, decision-making, self-control, achievement striving, and fixed mindset. Analysis of the data collected revealed issues with the skills measurement, which is why factor analysis was conducted to aggregate the underlying items into factors fitting better the data results. These are detailed in the table below.

Table C2. Unstandardized Results from Final Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Non-Cognitive Skills Module

	Loading	SE
<i>Extraversion</i>		
1. Are you talkative?	0.502	0.015
2. Are you outgoing and sociable, do you make friends easily?	0.672	0.012
3. Are you interested in learning new things?	0.635	0.013
4. Do you enjoy beautiful things, like nature, art, and music?	0.528	0.015
5. Are you very polite to other people?	0.648	0.013
<i>Workplace Attitudes and Behaviors</i>		
6. Do you come up with ideas others haven't thought of before?	0.575	0.019

²⁹ This section is a summary of appendices B and C in Ajwad et al., 2014.

7.	Do you work very hard? For example, do you keep working when others stop to take a break?	0.693	0.018
8.	Do you enjoy working on things that take a very long time to complete?	0.506	0.019
9.	Do people take advantage of you?	0.360	0.020
10.	Are people mean/not nice to you?	0.207	0.024
<hr/> <i>Decision Making</i>			
11.	Do you finish whatever you begin?	0.622	0.013
12.	Do you think about how the things you do will affect your future?	0.673	0.011
13.	Do you think carefully before you make an important decision?	0.683	0.011
14.	Do you ask for help when you don't understand something?	0.592	0.013
15.	Do you think about how the things you do will affect others?	0.669	0.011
<hr/> <i>Achievement Striving</i>			
16.	Do you do more than is expected of you?	0.587	0.014
17.	Do you strive to do everything in the best way?	0.723	0.013
18.	Do you try to outdo others, to be best?	0.463	0.016
<hr/> <i>Fixed Versus Growth Mindset</i>			
19.	The type of person you are is fundamental, and you cannot change much.	0.678	0.009
20.	You can behave in various ways, but your character can not really be changed.	0.711	0.009
21.	As much as I hate to admit it, you cannot teach an old dog new tricks. You cannot change their most basic properties.	0.697	0.008
22.	You have a certain personality and not much can be done to change that.	0.704	0.008



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