Center for Applied Policy and Integrity
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Mapping of policies, practices, and integrity in school admissions in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan

Issues paper

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

Background and purpose of the study

Public education is a sector guided by commitments – to quality, inclusion, equity, etc. – that steer the work of education professionals, reflect the expectations of education beneficiaries and describe the aspirations of decision-makers. In many countries, including those focused on in this paper, access to good quality education is among the most prominent of sectoral commitments: schooling is a constitutional right and in matters of educational choice, parents and students are protected from discrimination by law.

How well education meets such pledges does not depend on strategies and education policies alone. The willingness and capacity of education participants to apply a given policy in practice matter as well. Teachers, students, parents, administrators are "active constructors" of educational policies: they refract them through the prism of their own experiences, contexts, identities and so, as policy moves across multiple contexts and is thus appropriated by different actors, its outcomes may or may not coincide with the original intention of policymakers (de Jong, 2008)(Milovanovitch, Jokic, Gelashvili 2021).

Among the many factors that may influence the implementation of policy intentions from a stakeholder's point of view, prior research highlights in particular the role of professional environments. The circumstances of work and involvement of individuals may promote or prevent their commitment to the values and principles of their organisations (Doty & Kouchaki, 2015). In education and elsewhere, this means that the meeting of policy aspirations is contingent on the systemic contexts in which people participate in education, and not only their goodwill and character.

Gaps in policy and practice may influence these contexts in ways that lead to the proliferation of disadvantage and discrimination. In the area of school admissions, ill-fated policies and conditions of work and participation in education may jeopardise access to good schooling by promoting informal or otherwise problematic solutions. Such solutions commonly benefit a chosen few at the expense of many others, thus undermining the constitutional right to education in particular of those who are vulnerable and at risk of exclusion (OECD, 2018; Milovanovitch, 2020).

The identification and description of shortcomings in this respect can help to shape research and advocacy efforts and provide pointers for improvement to the benefit of all parties concerned. In an effort to support this process through an initial round of fact-finding and analysis, the Network of Education Policy Centers (NEPC) with the support of the Center for Applied Policy and Integrity (CAPI) has initiated a collaborative scan of policies and practices in the domain of school admissions in a selection of NEPC member countries. The objective of the initiative is to identify areas of gaps in policy and practice that need attention and further, more systematic analysis because of their potential to create integrity risks, jeopardise equity and inclusion, and reinforce a disadvantage.

About this issues paper

This issues paper provides an overview of results from an initial scan of primary and secondary evidence concerning school admissions in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, and has been prepared based on several rounds of evidence collection and consultations, as follows:

- **Round 1:** a writing process of the collecting and compiling of information and data about the organisation of the schooling system in each country and the regulatory framework that guides the process of school admissions in each

- **Round 2:** a writing process of the collecting and compiling of information about informal, illicit, or otherwise problematic practices in the domain of access to education and admission decisions that promote, disadvantage and fit into a broader definition of illicit access to education as the "arbitrary withholding or provision of access to education by those in charge of access, in exchange for undue benefits or the prospect thereof." (OECD, 2018)

- **Round 3:** a virtual focus group session for the purpose of generating additional, primary evidence about the application of policies in the domain of school admission, contextualising the evidence gathered in Rounds 1 and 2, and agreeing on the prioritisation of areas to be covered in the issues paper

- **Round 4:** consultation on the results from the scanning exercise and validation of findings and follow-up steps.

The purpose of the issues paper is to provide a basis for decisions about the follow-up analysis and action on the basis of the mapping of the schooling system set-up and admission policies in the participating countries, the consolidation of information about their admission practices, and the identification of areas of tentative risk to the integrity and equality of access to school education.

The work draws on the assumptions and theoretical framework of the Integrity of Education System's (INTES) methodology that defines integrity as the "continued commitment of education participants and institutions to act in accordance with values and principles without engaging in corruption, in professional environments that allow them to do so" (OECD, 2018).

Prior experience with the application of INTES in different countries shows that the stakeholder-centred, integrity angle can reveal previously undetected bottlenecks and barriers to improvement, and deliver additional, evidence-based arguments to advocacy campaigns and policy actions. It also equips participants with a set of powerful evidence collection and analysis tools to pursue their own interests and priorities more effectively in areas and segments of education which coincide with their interests as local organisations, i.e.in the area of school admission.

In the specific case of this initiative, the INTES framework facilitated the collection, organisation, and interpretation of evidence of systemic conditions in school education which are problematic from an integrity perspective as they may be promoting practices in school admission that depart from the aspirations, commitments, and intentions of practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders in the countries covered by the initiative.

The issues paper starts with a brief overview of schooling systems and admission arrangements (Chapter 2) and then it moves onto an overview of the policies and practices of tentative concern (Chapter 3), before concluding with a summary of the themes for follow-up research and action (Chapter 4).

CHAPTER TWO

OVERVIEW OF SCHOOLING SYSTEMS AND ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS

Providers and the organisation of school education

Providers by level of education and form of ownership

Although the schooling systems focussed on in this paper are distinctly different, they also have a number of similarities that are conducive to cross-country analysis and peer collaboration.

In all countries, schooling is organised into primary, lower secondary ("basic" in Georgia), and upper secondary education ("secondary" in Georgia), which are provided by elementary (primary or ISCED 1), basic (lower secondary or ISCED 2) and high (upper secondary or ISCED 3) schools, as well as schools providing education at various combinations of these levels or all levels at once (comprehensive schools).

The vast majority of these schools in the four countries are public. Private school enrolment is greatest in Georgia, where it accounts for 9.6% of total enrolment, and it is the smallest in Azerbaijan, where it accounts for less than 1% of total enrolment. Overall, the private education sector in all countries is small in international comparison. In the European Union, for example, private secondary schools alone account for close to 20% of total enrolment (2019).[1]

[1] Eurostat data: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Secondary_education_statistics

The total duration of primary and secondary education is 12 years, except for Kyrgyzstan where it is 11 years (Table 1). The duration of primary education ranges from four years in Armenia, Azerbaijan,[2] and Kyrgyzstan to 6 years in Georgia. In Georgia, lower secondary education is shorter in comparison to the other countries (three years instead of five). Upper secondary education takes two years in Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan, and three years in the other two countries. Despite differences in the official age of school entry, the theoretical age of graduation in all countries is 17.

Table 1. Educational levels by country, duration, and theoretical age of entry

Grade	Level	Age	Grade	Level	Age	Grade	Level	Age	Grade	Level	Age
12	Upper secondary (ISCED 3)	17				12	Secondary (ISCED 3)	17			
11		16	11	Upper secondary (ISCED 3)	16	11		16	11	Upper secondary (SCED 3)	17
10		15	10		15	10		15	10		16
9	Lower secondary (ISCED 2)	14	9	Lower secondary (ISCED 2)	14	9	Basic (ISCED 2)	14	9	Lower secondary (ISCED 2)	15
8		13	8		13	8		13	8		14
7		12	7		12	7		12	7		13
6		11	6		11	6	Primary (ISCED 1)	11	6		12
5		10	5		10	5		10	5		11
4	Primary (ISCED 1)	9	4	Primary (ISCED 1)	9	4		9	4	Primary (ISCED 1)	10
3		8	3		8	3		8	3		9
2		7	2		7	2		7	2		8
1		6	1		6	1		6	1		7
Armenia			**Azerbaijan**			**Georgia**			**Kyrgyzstan**		

Another similarity is that all countries meet the international standard of at least nine years of compulsory education. Armenia has made all schooling until Grade 12 compulsory. Similarly, all the countries share the commitment to the provision of free education for the duration of all schooling, as well as beyond the compulsory years: from Grade 1 to Grade 12 in Armenia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, and from Grade 1 to Grade 11 in Azerbaijan (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Years of free and compulsory primary and secondary education by country
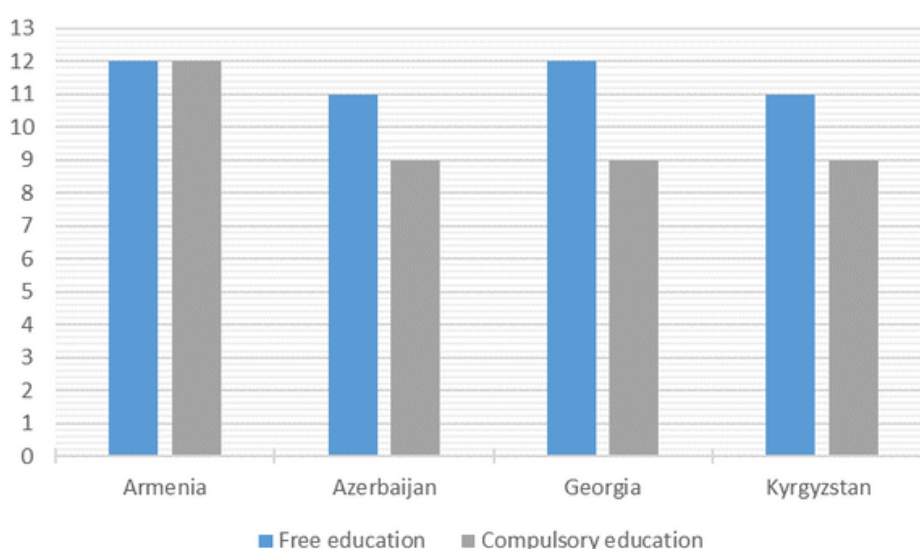
[2] In Azerbaijan there is a preparatory, pre-primary level that starts from the age of 5.

Providers by profile and programme orientation

In addition to the level of education and the form of ownership, a significant attribute by which schooling providers in the four countries can be described is the content and orientation of their programmes and curricula.

Like most countries in the Eurasian region, the countries in our selection follow a combination of comprehensive (or "common core") and differentiated ("diversified programme") models (OECD, 2013; UNESCO, 2021) in the organising of their school systems. After the successful completion of primary education, all students progress to lower secondary education, where they follow the same general, common core curriculum until a certain point (common core model). The system then foresees grouping them within and between schools (horizontal stratification) into diversified programmes and tracks (vocational, technical, general and/or profiled) based on their academic performance, aptitude, and interests (diversified programme model). Subsequently, in all countries except Azerbaijan, students also receive different certificates that allow them to progress (or stop them from progressing) to other levels of education. In Azerbaijan, the certificate is uniform for all schooling tracks.

To implement this achievement-based stratification (diversification) in practice, each country has established a network of profile or otherwise specialised schools, such as gymnasiums and lyceums in Kyrgyzstan; gymnasia, lyceums, and schools for gifted children in Azerbaijan; gymnasiums and schools specialised in subjects (Georgia), as well as high schools and schools specialised in arts, sports, and music (Armenia and Azerbaijan).

In addition to academic achievement, the diversification of educational opportunities can also be based on the needs of students for supplementary educational support or social protection. Examples of schooling providers who provide a needs-based diversification include boarding schools for children with disabilities (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan), for children deprived of parental care (Azerbaijan), boarding and resource schools for children with special educational needs - SEN (Georgia), and inclusive schools for children with SEN (Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan on a pilot basis). Admission to these types of educational opportunities, however, is beyond the remit of this issues paper.

Admissions policy and practice

The admission policies at the time of this mapping exercise in all countries were designed for the purpose of facilitating and managing the horizontal stratification of students by academic ability into the specialised educational opportunities described above and into other, less competitive schooling options. In fact, all four schooling systems are highly selective on the basis of academic performance, however, they differ in the way that they implement academic selectivity in practice.

For instance, in Armenia, and until recently in Kyrgyzstan too, the selection is based solely on classroom assessment results (successful graduation and grades from lower levels of education). In Azerbaijan and Georgia on the other hand, specialised schools are allowed to administer their own admissions in the form of tests and interviews. In the case of Azerbaijan, in-person interviews are envisaged for accessing some forms of primary education, i.e. language schools with Russian and English as the languages of instruction, and tests are foreseen for admission to specialised schools such as the Lyceum for talented children, the Arts Gymnasium, and the Specialised Music School.

Access to the rest of the schooling system in all countries (i.e. to neighbourhood schools) is supposed to be non-competitive and based primarily on meeting administrative criteria such as the area of residence (catchment area), age, availability of documentation, etc. Residence in a particular locality is among the most common criteria for admission, however, all countries have introduced supplementary considerations, which may improve the enrolment prospects of the children who meet them. Examples include one or both parents working at the school or having a sibling at the school (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), the time of registration in the queue in Kyrgyzstan (first come, first served), the presence of a special educational need (Georgia), etc.

To facilitate the management of non-competitive enrolment in primary education and strengthen the efficiency and integrity of the process even in contexts of high demand, all countries have introduced unified systems of electronic registration (electronic of e-queue systems or waiting lists). The allocation of places through these systems mirrors the mandatory criteria of the paper-based applications and includes a rank in the waiting list, the place or residence, the age of the child at the time of registration, etc. The responsibility for handling the systems is shared between local education authorities and a school's leadership.

It is important to note that the e-queue systems aid the process of application, but they do not automatise the taking of admission decisions. These decisions are still taken by education professionals, albeit at the level of local administrations instead of at the level of education providers.

CHAPTER THREE
POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF CONCERN

As already noted, the success of policies in the area of admission to education does not depend solely on the design of these policies, but also on the ways in which they are being interpreted and appropriated by education participants as well as by the context in which the policy application takes place.

While a degree of departure from original policy intentions is inevitable as policies undergo a "reality check" in educational practice, some departures may deserve a closer look because they are substantial enough to be of concern: either because they put some groups of education participants at a disadvantage while favouring others, or because they abuse the system to generate undue personal benefit or both. If they are intentional, such practices qualify as integrity violations within the INTES framework: the intentional actions by education participants, which generate undue personal benefit and occur system-wide in contradiction of the rules, standards, and principles in education. Such actions deserve attention because they may neutralise or even reverse policy achievements and jeopardise the meeting of important commitments in the education sector.

According to the 2018 INTES typology, integrity violations in the area of admission to education comprise actions to arbitrarily withhold or provide access to education by those in charge of access, in exchange for undue benefits or the prospect thereof. However, for the purposes of this issues paper, an even more important aspect of the integrity analysis is the question of vulnerabilities in policy and practice that might lead to integrity violations.

In other words, does the design and implementation of admission arrangements as reported by participants in this mapping lead to integrity-related departures at the stage of policy implementation, which might create disadvantages, promote exclusion, and limit access to good quality education?

The following sections list several instances of such departures that transpire from the information collected during the second and third rounds of evidence collection for this mapping. The sections draw upon prior research as well.

## Financial resources and informal responses

Description

The relatively small size of the private education sector in all countries implies that the network of public schools caters for the educational needs of the vast majority of the youth population. In turn, this generates demand for the adequate resourcing of schools. According to the information provided for the mapping, this is a task that all countries struggle with: resource and material shortages are persistent and commonplace in their public school systems and this is perceived as a major challenge by stakeholders and education professionals alike (Quote 1).

> *Quote 1: "Vulnerabilities exist, schools are in dire need of additional funds, and a large part of the school budget deficit is supplemented by parental donations."*

The reasons for the shortages appear to be largely comparable. For one, all countries except Kyrgyzstan are consistent in spending a relatively small share of their national wealth on education (Figure 2). In 2019, which is the last year for which there is data, Azerbaijan and Armenia spent a mere 2.7% and 2.0% of their GDP on education, respectively. At close to 4%, Georgia spent a somewhat higher proportion (3.8%), but this is still well short of the average spending in European Union countries (4.7%).

Figure 2. Public spending on education as a percentage of GDP: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and the EU average (2009-2019)
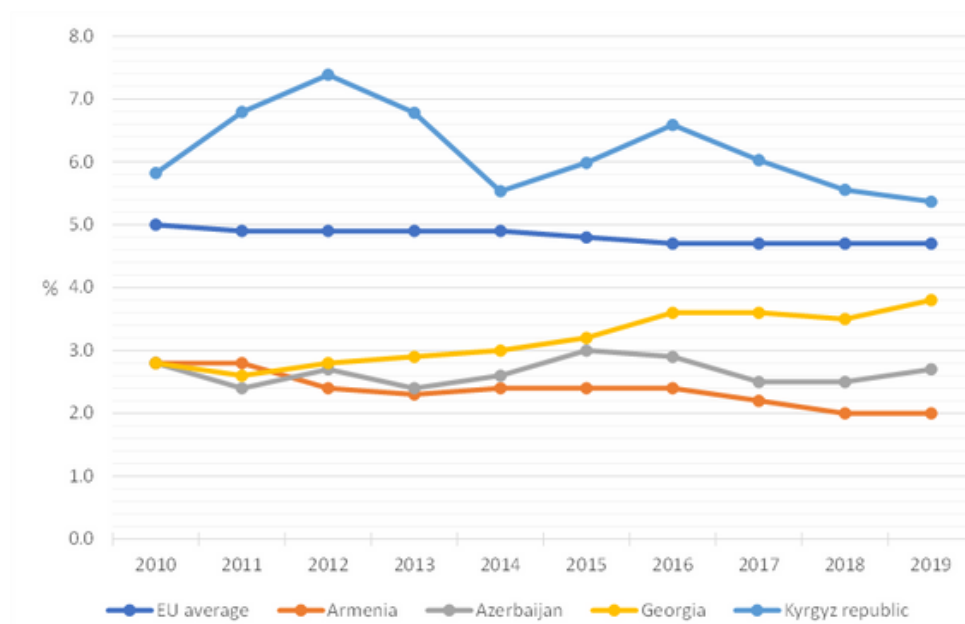
Sources: (World Bank, 2021), Eurostat

More importantly, the allocation of resources does not seem to be efficient and responsive enough. As is the case with countries in other NEPC regions (Western Balkans and Turkey) (CAPI, 2021), more often than not, funds do not go where they might be needed and when they might be needed most. Resource allocations are rigid (Quote 2), and they also tend to favour schools that are already better off (Quote 3) while neglecting to account for the more specific needs of those which are socio-economically disadvantaged. Funding may also be spread thinly across a disproportionately vast network of schools, such as small-scale schools in remote and rural areas.

> *Quote 2: School principals, school principal's deputies and classroom teachers involved in the system of informal payments, collecting for various purposes, from school event expenses to expenses related to maintaining hygienic conditions. The last type of expenses increased due to the implementation of effective hygienic protocols... Also, there are some expenses that are hardly covered by our national budget."*

> *Quote 3: High schools get more funding from the state budget in comparison to high grades of 12-year comprehensive schools. They are better equipped with teaching staff and technical capacities, such as labs and other materials. All this focus on and investments in high schools make graduates of these institutions more competitive in comparison with their rural peers who study in 12-year comprehensive schools that have no access to such extra support and have a weaker infrastructure, technical and teaching resources."*

Vectors of risk

The resource shortages create dependency on private sources, which then opens a channel to undue influence on admission decisions. Schools are routinely struggling due to a lack of capital investment and low levels of spending on infrastructure maintenance. It is not uncommon for the physical conditions there to be sub-standard, school renovation being a major concern for a majority of school principals. In this situation, principals have a strong incentive to fill the gaps by diverting and reallocating funding in formal and informal ways, and to "fundraise" with parents (Quotes 4 and 5).

> **Quote 4:** *"This phenomenon has always existed. The parents give "donations" for school auditorium renovations, for purchasing any products that are necessary for the school, i.e., doorknobs, curtains, as well as for involvement of extra curricula lessons/private tutoring...."*

> **Quote 5:** *"Schools are in dire need of additional funds, and a large part of the school budget deficit is supplemented by parental donations. But these fees are given during the entire period of the child's schooling. "Admission" fees and the possibility of selecting financially "more promising" students are now blocked by an electronic queuing system."*

In settings in which schools need additional funding, the prospect of financial and in-kind support by parents can be an important consideration at the stage of admission. Prior research has shown that in such settings, families who can commit to financial donations would have a greater chance of securing a place in that school than families who are less well-off. To address this challenge, all the countries have introduced some form of electronic queuing and admission management, however, this has created a separate set of integrity-related challenges, as discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Areas and themes for a follow-up

Parental donations as a phenomenon and widespread practice have been extensively explored before, and the demand-side from the perspective of the providers and their needs has been well-documented as well. What is missing is the perspective of the parents, specifically an exploration of what their reasons for financial involvement are, what they hope to achieve by donating, whether these reasons include an intention to influence decisions and if yes, which decisions and in what policy area. This will help to establish the extent to which private donations play a role in the domain of access to education.

Network planning and capacity shortages

Description

An additional layer of integrity-related challenges emerges around the capacity of schools to cater for the demands of education. The majority of the population in the countries in our sample lives in urban areas that also account for the biggest part of the gross domestic product and employment opportunities. Internal migration and the associated rapid growth of urban areas and the demand for school places is putting pressure on urban school networks to expand provision and cater for a greater number of students than they were designed for.

> **Quote 6:** *"The pace of new school construction does not keep pace with population growth and internal migration flows. The need for places for first graders is twice the capacity of the infrastructure."*

The problem is exacerbated by difficulties in adapting the school network in line with such demographic developments. For one, there is a lack of reliable data about actual enrolment capacity, the level of demand, and the shortage of places. In some countries (for instance Kyrgyzstan), deficits also seem to exist regarding reliable and updated census data, which hinders the proper planning of the school network.

> **Quote 7:** *"The system for registering children who live in a specific area and must be enrolled in school does not work... In reality, no one collects high-quality information today and... the data collection system has been repeatedly criticised."*

Finally, the regulatory environment in which property developers make their decisions about new projects does consider the educational implications of these decisions, which leads to unplanned rises in student numbers. Rapid urban growth and housing developments are known to go hand in hand with increased educational demand, just like following large-scale residential constructions the number of school-age children commonly rises sharply (OECD, 2018).

Vectors of risk

Neighbourhood schools in bigger cities are exposed to a range of difficulties in managing access and many of them can be traced to enrolment capacity shortages. Faced with more applicants than they can enrol, such schools are left with no alternative but to limit access.

In a regulatory setting, which does allow for selectivity (for good reasons), schools limit access either by infringing the rule that they must accept all children from their respective catchment area or by infringing the rules prohibiting entrance examinations. From the parental side, the planning gap may motivate participation in problematic practices around admissions for reasons of convenience (Quote 8)

> **Quote 8:** "If the school doesn't have the capacity to enrol more students, it becomes an issue for the parents who have to choose another school far from their places of residence."

> **Quote 9:** "The principals of big, urban, "prestigious" schools are forced to apply the filters (e.g. exam, interview) to manage the number of students in school."

Areas and themes for a follow-up

Changes in enrolment capacity and the school network are an area of interventions that can be politically sensitive, costly, and resistant to changes. Nevertheless, gaps in this area have long-term consequences as drivers of problematic practices around admission and as promoters of disadvantage and therefore it would be important to at least start establishing a common base of evidence in support of better planning and awareness-raising.

The first step in this direction would be to map the school network capacity against population data by urban, rural, and remote areas in order to determine the extent to which the problem is present.

The second step would be to map school network planning processes and the evidence used in these processes and compare that to good practice from other countries.
Finally, it would be important to explore the perceptions and experiences of parents by various characteristics (place of residence, socio-economic background, school choice, etc.) regarding the availability and shortages of school places, of their strategies to cope with the shortages, and of their views of how important the problem is for them.

Selectivity in public education: "elite" and ordinary schools

Description

The perhaps most significant formal attribute of schooling providers in the four countries is the content and orientation of their school programmes. This feature - whether they are "elite" because of their specialisation or because of other reasons, such as a long history, and whether they are general education or vocational education and training (VET) institutions – is a major determinant of the formal and reputational status of schools in the education system, of the admission policies and procedures that they can apply, and of the resources that they can hope to receive every year (Quote 10).

> **Quote 10:** *"High schools get more funding from the state budget, in comparison to high grades of 12-year comprehensive schools. They are better equipped with teaching staff and technical capacities, such as labs and other materials."*

Schools as small organisations have the inclination to ensure and maintain a working environment in which they can function optimally. The elite schools (gymnasiums, lyceums, otherwise specialised schools) seem to be in a legally guaranteed "comfort zone": teachers work with pre-selected students who are from more affluent backgrounds, more interested, and/or simply more academically successful; this in turn has a positive impact on the teachers' career advancement, income, and on the overall attractiveness of the schools. Additionally, such providers are usually supported by well-to-do parents, who can provide generous contributions to school funds.

For all other schools that are not granted a special status and permission to preselect their students, the described teaching and learning environment is something to aspire to (Quote 11). The same is true for the parents of prospective students. Enrolment in a school is good, but enrolment in a good school with good teachers and school leadership is even better. However, since countries in our sample rarely (if at all) offer objective, trustworthy and publicly accessible information about a school's quality (see for instance Quote 12),[3] parents must rely on their own perceptions and beliefs to navigate the educational offer.

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[3] In Azerbaijan there is an open access site which offers information about school graduation and university admission scores of school students from 1995 to date, however, it remains an open question as to whether graduation and admission scores in multiple-choice tests are a good indicator of the quality of education provided by a school.

> **Quote 11:** *"A lot of schools are trying to act as elite schools or high-quality schools. Parents want their children to be accepted there and because of the number of children, this is their only option for admission to a better school."*

> **Quote 12:** *"The lack of objective information about the quality of education provided by schools leads to an uneven demand for education in different schools. Information about the quality of the curriculum, the availability of teachers and the level of their professionalism is not available to parents and when choosing they are guided either by outdated information or information from social networks and word of mouth."*

The strongest and seemingly most widespread of these beliefs is that certain types of schools (gymnasiums, lyceums, colleges) are "better" because they are "elite" by status and/or mandate (for instance, a school for exceptional or talented children i.e. in Azerbaijan), and that the majority of other, neighbourhood schools that emulate them (for instance, by having above-average physical infrastructure and/or with teachers who have successfully trained winners of Olympiads, etc.) are the second-best option - "elite" schools by hearsay, so to speak. In the absence of objective information and trust, hearsay about the quality of a given school may become a self-fulfilling prophecy that drives enrolment to that school, strengthens early tracking and promotes it into common practice.

> **Quote 13:** *"In practice, we observe a high demand for admission to some of the general educational institutions (those that are perceived to be "elite", "prestigious", "good" schools because officially school ranking is not available), as well as to schools with either Russian or English as the language of instruction."*

Although the schooling systems of the countries in our sample are highly diversified, the schools that are good by status or hearsay are a minority. The number of these schools is less than the number of ordinary neighbourhood schools by a long way and so demand for places in schools that are (or are believed to be) "better" outstrips their enrolment capacity greatly. This creates severe competition for first-time enrolment in the elite schools by status and also in those that are good by hearsay, despite the rules and regulations that prohibit selective admission to most of them.

This is an observation which holds well beyond the four countries in our sample. In countries with large differences in performance and quality between programmes and schools, or where socio-economic segregation is firmly entrenched because of residential segregation or for other reasons, admission and grouping policies have high stakes for parents and students (OECD, 2013).

Vectors of risk

The contexts described so far are contexts of a veritable integrity risk in which schools and parents alike may be compelled to overcome the bottleneck situation through informal transactions. The shortage of sufficiently good schooling options and of admission policies that have gaps - are the most significant policy challengesfrom the point of view of integrity, next to the plain shortage of enrolment capacity due to deficient school planning. The wishes of parents to ensure the best school choice in terms of quality and ease of access (e.g. preference for enrolment in a school within the catchment area) turn admission to schooling into a high stake event that can (and often is) marked by malpractice in the enrolment process.

One vector of risk emerges from the practice of preparatory programmes or tutoring services in preparation for admission to academically selective schools. Participation in such preparatory arrangements can take the form of school readiness programmes offered by the sought after schools for their prospective candidates, or of private tutoring services by the very same teachers who are in charge of the testing and admission recommendations. Participants in these programmes and services might have an undue advantage over those who did not or could not enrol in them, irrespective of their academic achievement.

Another vector of risk includes the abuse of information asymmetry that exists between parents and education officials/school representatives regarding the availability of places in schools. In all four countries, the provision of public information about that depends on the goodwill of the school principals and even then, parents cannot be certain as to whether the information provided is accurate and trustworthy (Quote 14):

> **Quote 14:** *"Parents can indicate online preferences for several schools in the catchment area. However, some schools in a neighbourhood area may refuse a child's admittance, informing them that there are no available places for a child. Parents can't check if the integrity is violated in this case."*

There is a degree of information opaqueness in this respect in all countries, which is remarkable considering the stakes and risks around access to sought-after schooling opportunities. Integrity violations in admission may thrive for many reasons, and a lack of transparency regarding enrolment capacity is certainly one of them. It is therefore surprising that there are no minimum standards of accountability and transparency in handling this type of information vis-à-vis the public.

A third and final vector of risk concerns the testing of prospective students by schools that are not expected to be academically selective (these are, in fact, the majority of schools), but to cater for all children living in their catchment area and meeting certain administrative criteria. Schools that are not permitted to select students, but have more candidates than places, are creating and applying a combination of formal and informal admission criteria of their own (usually academic performance and aptitude) that are unregulated, can be of inappropriate complexity, and promote arbitrariness and abuse at the level of entry and/or preceding levels of education. These illicit tests usually mimic those of the specialised schools and bring the risk of the granting of preferential access to some students while violating the right of priority access of others (Quote 15).

> **Quote 15:** *"Despite the fact that admission testing has been banned for a long time, testing was carried out everywhere. School representatives said that the tests are purely diagnostic in nature in order to determine the "growth of the child in the future" or in order to "better know the characteristics of the child in order to choose the best approach for him/her." But in practice, it was at the time of passing the testing that pressure was exerted on the parents, either by an insistent recommendation to choose another school or by a recommendation to get an additional paid service from the school."*

To some extent, the testing may be playing a role in promoting a belief that neighbourhood schools that use competitive enrolment examinations or "tests" may be better than others that did not. An even more important reason is that testing gives schools that are obliged to provide non-competitive access a way to manage the oversupply of candidates for a limited number of places, as discussed before.

Although all countries report e-queuing systems as a solution that may be preventing such practices, at this stage of the mapping exercise it is less clear how successful these systems really are in this respect (see also the next section).

Areas and themes for a follow-up

The gaps and risk areas discussed in this section provide rich follow-up opportunities concerning an important topic: the exploration of the "good" or "elite" school phenomenon in education systems that were designed to be genuinely egalitarian, as well as the repercussions it may have on equity and inclusion in the rest of the education system. This exploration could include:

- a data perspective in the form of the analysis of the performance of schools perceived to be good, development of a typology, and mapping of the equity impact;

- a stakeholder perspective in the form of parental perceptions, beliefs, and experiences with what a good school is or should be;
- the mapping of academic selection practices by providers who are supposed to follow non-competitive admission procedures. Here too, the capturing of parental experiences with these practices could complement the analysis in ways that would add value and open new avenues of approaching long-standing problems.
- an overview of international (and European Union in particular) good practice in solving problems with access to schools that are in high demand.

Specific issues in admission policy: electronic queueing systems

Description

The electronic application and queuing systems have been introduced in all four countries as a "broad-brush solution" to integrity, efficiency, and transparency concerns in the area of school admission. According to all mapping sources, these systems have indisputable advantages: they reduce the arbitrariness in enrolment decisions during first-time entry, and they also provide an entry point towards a wider and deeper digitalisation of educational and provider management.

Vectors of risk

Despite their advantages, the e-queueing system also has shortcomings that often enough seem to force a change in the choice of informal transactions for admission instead of preventing them. One example is the fact that these systems do not introduce or modify admission criteria, they only help to record and manage compliance with the existing criteria. This means that if any of these criteria had deficiencies to start with, these deficiencies (including integrity and equity-related ones) will be replicated in the e-queue system and possibly even reinforced.

Equity gaps and socio-economic disadvantage come to mind as an example in this respect. Families who were at a disadvantage at the time of application due to their socio-economic status are likely to have become even more disadvantaged by the introduction of the e-queueing system because of connectivity and digital proficiency limitations. In fact, capacity and other limitations with the use of technology may be affecting larger swathes of the population independently of their socio-economic status, yet none of the systems has been assessed for usability and stability under real-life circumstances. However, this limitation is not always straightforward to establish and would require further research.

> *Quote 16:* *"The online admission process may seem to be a barrier to families either not having the Internet at home or having a weak Internet connection. However, according to anecdotal evidence, it is recommended that these parents approach in-person to local education departments. Also, parents can follow the online admission guidelines using their mobile phones."*

Another limitation of the e-queuing systems is their limited technical maturity and penetration across the system. Some countries have reported widespread malfunctioning (denial of service) at times of peak use, e.g. during first time registration for the school year, while in others, e-queueing is available only in the bigger cities (where the enrolment capacity shortages are also the highest).

> *Quote 17:* *"Electronic admissions in schools has been practised for the last three years and is practised only in the capital, regional centres, large and medium-sized cities."*

Finally, e-queueing targets a narrow time window in the process of admission, which is limited to the time of the admission campaign for first-time access. Anecdotal evidence provided during the third round of evidence collection suggests that, upon the end of the official admission campaign, principals can (and do) enrol students at a later stage and at their own discretion. They do this usually during the first weeks of the school year by withholding information about places that have become vacant due to students who did not enrol despite having a place.

Areas and themes for a follow-up

E-queuing is presented as the most common and hopeful feature of admission policy in all four countries, but at the same time, it seems that it is also the least explored policy solution in terms of effectiveness and impact. Considering the stakes involved and the expectations associated with it, and with the digitalisation of education more broadly, the lack of systematic evaluation and analysis is a gap in itself.

A follow-up in this area could include the proper mapping of e-queueing systems to document their set-up and operation modalities and analyse their strengths and weaknesses against official narratives and stakeholder experiences. Parents and their experiences with e-queueing systems should thereby be given priority among the stakeholder groups that could be the focus of such a detailed exploration.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY

This issues paper provided an initial scan of tentative issues and integrity concerns in the domain of school admissions. It is an overview that is reliable enough for the purpose of further planning, but it also calls for a follow-up analysis based on the INTES methodology, in view of confirming the conclusions, adding more detail, and highlighting issues that must be prioritised in subsequent projects.

In the same vein, the paper identified four areas of concern that may merit a follow-up because of their significance for integrity and equity in school admissions, and also because of their largely unexplored impact on the education systems overall: 1. School network planning and capacity; 2. Exploration of selectivity and good and elite school phenomenon; 3. Undue influence on admissions through parental donations, and 4. E-queueing systems. In all of these, the mapping of good international practice is also recommended.

Figure 3. Thematic grouping of options for a follow-up

1 School network planning and capacity
- Data and evidence
- Processes
- Parental perceptions

2 Exploration of selectivity and the "good"/"elite" school phenomenon
- From data and equity point of view
- From parental point of view

3 Undue influence on admissions through donations
- Parental perspective and experiences

4 E-queueing systems
- Set-up, strengths, weaknesses
- Parental experiences with their use and abuse

These areas are interconnected and so "unpacking" any one of them will most likely benefit subsequent work on all the others. Additionally, they can all be explored either with a cross-country perspective or in the form of a strictly national follow-up. In any case, we recommend considering the parental perspective as a transversal dimension of research in all of them.

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