

Section 1.

Social and economic factors influencing accessibility of higher education

Accessibility of higher education: social and institutional aspects

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Problem

The problems of accessibility of higher education and inequality in this field are not only academic sociological problems interesting for researchers, social problems interesting for professors or administrative problems interesting for managers. These problems are discussed by pupils in secondary schools and other educational institutions, higher school entrants and students. These problems are keenly stir up parents and other members of families where there are children. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that these problems stir up the whole Russian society.

The reason for this is that the Russian society has experienced a radical change of the mechanisms and channels of vertical mobility within very short time. Education, including higher education, still playing the role of the channel leading to the base of the social pyramid, has been substantially altered due to alteration of this pyramid.

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to obtain real picture of expectances and requests of various groups of population with respect to higher education and identify the system of motivation for getting higher education and spectrum of assessment of accessibility of various forms of higher education for different categories of population (according to the types of social, material and cultural resources of those groups).

The tasks of the study consisted in determining evolution of the functions of secondary and higher school in Russian labor market and socio-cultural development of Russian society, as well as identifying the barriers for access of various groups of population to higher education of various quality and various professions basing on the opinions and ideas about education and its institutions, as well as on practices and educational strategies of various social groups.

Methodology

To resolve these tasks 3000 interviews were carried out in summer 2003 basing on a sampling representative for population of Russia from 15 to 35 year old (hereinafter referred to as «youth poll»), and 2000 interview on sampling representative for population of Russia from 15 year old and elder (hereinafter referred to as «population poll»).

In addition, panel discussions were organized with school-leavers, their parents and people of different education and income level in Taganrog, Novgorod Velikiy, Voronezh, Nizhniy Novgorod and Moscow.

Results

1. Recent years have been marked by sharp growth of demand for higher education services and growth of supply in reply. The share of students in population structure grew from 190 per 10 thousand in 1995 up to 332 per 10 thousand in 2001. However, number of professors grew to lesser extent: from 1995 to now total number of higher school professors grew as much as by 13%. The gap between the number of students and professors means that the load of professors grows. This fact combined with preservation of traditional teaching technologies lets conclude that quality of education dispensed by higher schools is in general lowering down.

Thus, we witness a paradox: a boom among youth going to higher school and large-scale lowering of teaching quality. The latter tendency is pronounced both on the offer side and demand side. The opinion of experts is concurring: besides the fact that more and more higher schools with low teaching level open, considerable (much higher than in Soviet time) part of youth entered to higher school have very bad school results or do not learn at all.

2. Aiming at getting higher education is very wide-spread. According to the youth poll, absolute and overwhelming number of youth are sure that higher education is necessary (89%). In age group of 20-24 years, 2/3 of the pollees pretend to education at higher school level and higher. Interest for research and education is declared by more than one third of the pollees of 15-20 years old. According to the study, 67% of persons of 15-35 years age believe that there are a lot of vacancies in labor market for graduates from higher schools and that employees there have good earnings.

All the occupations preferred by youth are from the so-called «new economy», which is represented by the jobs of businessmen, managers, specialists in information technologies, economists, lawyers and other employees in the sector of services. In Russia, such jobs appeared about ten years ago. Not only earnings, which were substantially higher than in traditional public sector, but also many qualitative features of those professions proved to be attractive among youth.

The system of higher education rather quickly reacted on the emerging demand. Many higher schools opened training for respective professions. True, doing so they mostly did not accounted for the fact that the requirements for managerial staff in the sector of services are absolutely different from those that were set forth for production managers, for example, in the Soviet military industrial complex and in the sectors supporting and servicing the latter.

3. Group discussions made it possible to work out a comprehensive explanation of the employer's practice of always preferring people with higher education. Today's employee must be a bearer of new occupational ethics and «discipline» and be «socially predictable» (for this purpose, a system of motivation for career and professional advance is implemented). This is just what higher education generates.

Talking about high demand for people with higher education in the sector of services, we did not mention the knowledge they receive. The point is that, except cases where certain special knowledge is involved, for example, knowledge of certain group of goods or specific products being sold by a salesman, the employer require no special knowledge from the employee. As far as information on specific goods it is given to the employee by the employer through a system of internal training. In this case, contents and scope of knowledge imparted and monitoring of its assimilation is fully under control of the employer or employer's specialized training department. What is required from the employee under such circumstances is not knowledge itself, but ability to assimilate knowledge. In other terms, from the training process one follows in a higher school he/she must retain not so much its essential results, but the skill of knowledge assimilation. Consequently, employer really needs one having graduated from a higher school, which means having formally fulfilled all the requirements. A diploma is, besides all, an indication of self-discipline, quality highly appreciated by employers.

4. The existing practice of employment of people with diploma of any higher school in the sector of services has affected the attitude of future employees towards selection of higher school and further towards the knowledge dispensed there. Interviews with higher school professors testify to «lack of motivation» of today's higher school students as misfortune of many higher schools¹.

Higher education really becomes a sort of social standard, but not at all in the sense of mandatory standard valid for secondary education. Furthermore, higher schools very often raise barriers (filters) for entrants. Overcoming them requires from an entrant and/or his/her family big intellectual, nervous or material expenses. Professors' complaints about lack of motivation of the students grew in parallel with growing parents' complaints about rise of price for entrance to higher schools. Moreover, as far as it is possible to judge by collected desultory data, the share of highly motivated students in the so-called "elite" higher schools is somewhat larger than in reputedly "weak" higher schools. However, the share of non-motivated students in expensive schools is rather large, too.

Without pretending to fully resolve the issue of the causes of this phenomenon, we can note that, to a large extent, they are due to future uselessness of the special knowledge received in higher school. Such higher schools or courses give raise to unfavorable social situation. Lack of motivation with the students annuls professor's motivation. The situation that occurs now does not match the well-known situation of education exclusively for diploma. What is more important is not, in our opinion, deception of employer by employee holder of a diploma with no knowledge assumable as per this diploma, but the fact that employer does not need this knowledge.

5. Among total population from 15 years old and elder, the answer «practically any higher education is accessible» was selected by 17%. In the group of age below 35 years, the share of such answer grows up to 23%. The answer «practically inaccessible» was selected by 40% of total population of Russia. For the group 15-35 years old, this share drops down to 27%. One third of total population (32%) and 45% of people 15-35 years old preferred the answer worded as follows: «higher education is accessible, but not any; good education is most often inaccessible».

There is direct correlation between the assessments by the pollees of accessibility of higher education for them and level of average family income per capita.

6. Socio-cultural capital of the family considerably influences both reference points of teenagers and youth in the field of education and assessment of their own prospects in this field. At listing the most important resources for entering higher school, the pollees put "connections" to higher position than family's material resources. According to the pupils, the hierarchy of the capital for getting higher education is as follows: №1: general knowledge, №2: connections, №3: parents' wealth, №4: special knowledge. The experience of higher school students makes them range the importance of these factors differently: №1: connections, №2: special knowledge, №3: general knowledge, №4: parents' wealth.

7. Substantial is the difference of assessment of accessibility of higher education between pollees belonging to groups with various educational status.

Residential differences in the level of assessment of accessibility of higher education are clearly pronounced, but the nature is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, there is shift in favor of higher accessibility of higher education in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg and other cities, on the other hand, towards lesser accessibility in medium-size towns and rural areas, while in smaller towns, assessment of accessibility level is substantially higher than expected. Probably, this can

¹ Practical professors mention the problem of lack of motivation among pupils for more than ten years. It has been fixed by our study. However, professors are inclined to associate it with compulsory character of secondary education, that's why people who do not need this at all go to school.

be explained by different level of requirements for higher education typical for cities and towns. Opening of many subsidiaries of big regional higher schools in towns that has taken place since recent years could have satisfied local demand for higher education for a time. At the same time, the inhabitants of towns are no longer satisfied with the existing opportunities for them: in the field of higher education, they look at capital cities and consider their prospects limited.

8. The study has confirmed that there is a clearly pronounced demand in society for revival of the prestige of the Russian higher school. There is no doubt that efforts for opening of new universities in Russia giving education at the level of the leading higher schools in Europe and America would be given wide public support. Demand for education of such level would come, firstly, from the well-off part of Russian population. Secondly, elite higher education is the target for people with considerable socio-cultural capital. And finally thirdly, the study has detected a small, but socially important group of highly motivated teenagers aiming at getting high-quality higher education, but having low socio-cultural resources. The study lets us assert that this category require special attention from educational authorities, charity organizations, etc. The prospective educational model should include social tools for finding and support of such individuals.

9. Special measures facilitating remote education or education by correspondence are required for certain categories of population (mature people with family having rational, if not pragmatic attitude towards higher education). In some cases, they need a diploma confirming their competence to keep their current job, or with appropriate training and following special course giving the right of taking respective position (career advance). In other cases, that may complete change of profession under reduction of labor market for respective professions or companies. In each case, what is needed is not higher education in general, but a course of specific matters allowing people to determine the scope and targets of their higher education on their own.

10. The results of the study make it possible to talk about necessary continuation of studying current situation, where society sets forth increased demand for low-quality educational services, as the situation looks like from the traditional viewpoint. We attempted to propose a new vision, asserting that this demand is not for the knowledge offered by higher school in the form of courses, disciplines and matters, but for the skills and cultural standards dispensed by the education process as such and higher school atmosphere.

If it is discovered that this tendency has chances for steady reproduction (will not disappear due to some economic or demographic causes), then options of founding new type of school where mass personnel for new sector of economy would be trained accounting for specific requirements of the latter should be studied. The new type of school should assume an important social function. Education there should not be oriented to receiving knowledge in the traditional format of disciplines of matters of today's Russian secondary and higher school. A set of programs should be developed to train a many-sided employee able to further rapidly and efficiently assimilate an amount of specific knowledge in the profession of field of activity he/she chooses. Specific knowledge may be received in the course of internal corporate training or at getting second higher education.