

Differentiation of higher education as a public institution and changes in accessibility of higher education for various social groups

**Project team: A.A. Veikher (Project Director),
A.Z. Andreiko, Y.V. Bogdanova, N.A. Zaichenko, I.V. Kremenitskaya and
L.V. Prokhorova**

State University Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg's Branch

Problem

Two conflicting trends have been observed in Russia for the last decade. On the one hand, the number of students admitted to higher schools has been steadily growing. On the other, the number of university graduates unable to find a job coherent with their education and qualifications, has been growing too. Thus, accessibility of higher education has increased, while availability of job positions (for which people are supposed to enter higher school in the first place) has been decreasing.

Objectives

The project was designed to test a hypothesis regarding qualitative changes in social and economic functions of higher schools and various socio-economic institutions that are believed to better match supply of, with demand for higher school graduates. We also assumed that there are higher school and students who see higher education as a general¹ (rather than specialized profession-oriented) education. Therefore, higher education as a public institution is not homogenous. Rather, it consists of several subsystems that carry out different public reproduction functions.

Methodology

The above hypotheses have been tested using data obtained through:

- Representative surveys among adults in St. Petersburg conducted in 2001 (sample size = 12,866 respondents)² and 2003 (N=1270 respondents);
- Survey of students representing all educational facility types and levels (ranging from pupils to magisters). The survey covered 754 respondents, including 384 in Republic of Karelia.
- In addition, in-depth interviews with 25 parents of high school graduates and with 28 representatives of Russia's education system were conducted. Assessment of the trends in Russia as a whole have been made using official national statistical reports.

¹ In this report, "General education" means education that is considered useful or necessary by the student irrespective of where he or she will be working in the future (or whether or not he/she will be working at all).

² Data provided by Crona Korsinto.

Findings

Research outcomes have confirmed and fine-tuned our original assumptions.

1. Previously, “unequal access” was correctly interpreted by Russian researchers as uneven access to higher school admission across social groups. In the past, higher education was considered as a necessary and even sufficient prerequisite for assuring graduate’s further social mobility. However, disruption of dependence between getting admitted to an higher education institution and further vertical mobility has made traditional definition of “unequal access to higher education” incoherent with today’s Russian realities.

By traditional Soviet-era standards, higher education in Russia has become more accessible. The share students in the overall Russia’s population exceeds that in other developed nations. Once a “privilege of selected ones”, higher education has now become a starting point for the vast majority of young people in Russia. A rough comparison of the number of students in Russia (5.95 million students³) with the size of any 5-year cohort in an 15-30 age group will show that at least one half of Russia’s young people are receiving higher education.

2. An opportunity to receive a degree from a public or private higher education institution on a fee-for-service basis has increased the chances of low-income residents to enter the system. Nowadays, applicants have a chance to avoid intense entrance competition at public higher schools and enter a private university for a relatively modest fee. Also, “weak” candidates whose families used to bribe public higher school’s officials have turned to chargeable divisions of state-owned higher school or to private universities.

3. For most low-income families higher education is inaccessible, because they can not afford to pay for preparatory courses or advanced/additional services at higher school or to compensate for the poor quality of the latter.

4. Although higher education is becoming more accessible, the share of university graduates who are unable to find jobs adequate to their education and qualification – i.e. to obtain certain social status which they strived for when entering their higher school - continues to grow. Employed respondents were asked a question: “What kind of education and how many years in practice does one have to have to do your current job?”. Obviously, respondents could have underestimated or overestimated knowledge and skills objectively required for their job positions. That is why we see data presented in Table 1 as socially-weighted (subjective) estimates. However, we value them more than objective statements, since individuals’ actions and self-esteem are determined mainly by existing social norms.

As we see, in 2001, most jobs in St. Petersburg, a megapolis, were not seen by employees as those requiring the person to be university-educated, and the number of university graduates exceeded the number of available job positions.

This gap was especially significant for people aged 20-29. In this age group more respondents said that their job did not require any special skills or qualifications (i.e. less than 7 days of on-the-job training).

Unlike in older age groups, higher education alone does not give its young owners better chances of getting a higher-paid job.

³ Data for academic year 2002-2003: Russian Statistical Annual Report, 2003; Moscow, 2003, p. 229

Table 1

Distribution of employed respondents' answers* to the question "What kind of education and how many years in practice does one have to have to do your current job?", 2001, St. Petersburg (%)

	Age group			Mean for all employed respondents
	20	30	40	
To do my job you have to:				
Have higher education	27	39	42	37
Have spent at least 1 month in practice	5	2	3	3
Have spent at least 7 days in practice	12	5	5	7
Respondents with higher (including incomplete) education	51	54	56	54
Total number of respondents	1265	2014	2230	5509

*Respondents' answers regarding the scope of required education were recorded using a 7-point scale, as follows: 1- less than 1 week; 2- less than 1 month; 3 – less than 1 year; 4 – secondary technical college; 5- higher technical college; 6 – higher (university-level) education; 7 – Graduate higher education plus post-graduate program. Respondents' answers regarding time in practice necessary to perform their current jobs were placed on a 4-point scale as follows: 1 – less than 7 days; 2 – less than 1 month; 3 – less than 1 year; 4 – more than 1 year.

Source: Crona Korsinto, 2001

Table 2

Distribution of St. Petersburg's residents (various age groups) by monthly personal income and by education received

Age	Education	Personal income (1,000 Rubles)					# of Respondents
		<3	3-6	6-10	10-15	>15	
20 – 29	Secondary specialized (Technical college)	20%	23%	28%	14%	15%	71
	Higher	14%	32%	22%	17%	15%	113
30 – 39	Secondary specialized (Technical college)	9%	34%	31%	11%	15%	98
	Higher	14%	21%	24%	14%	27%	129
40 – 49	Secondary specialized (Technical college)	15%	40%	28%	10%	7%	156
	Higher	14%	23%	28%	18%	17%	175
Mean value		14%	29%	27%	14%	16%	742

The share of individuals with higher education is the highest among employed respondents whose monthly personal income exceeds 1,000 U.S. dollars (90%). However such people account for only 10% of employed respondents who have higher education. Therefore, it can be concluded that higher education is a necessary, but insufficient key to a well-paid job.

5. The survey data make us conclude that higher school, whose previous ultimate goal was to deliver profession-oriented education, have assumed a new social function. Nowadays they also provide general education, i.e. education that is seen as useful irrespective of the student's future occupation or employment plans.

It has to be admitted that Russia's higher education system is becoming increasingly differentiated. Therefore, stratification of Russian higher schools by status is inevitable. We interpret such stratification of the country's higher education system as a natural and publicly-approved separation of the system's two functions, i.e. provision of general and specialized (profession-oriented) education.

6. Many entrants and students view rank-and-file Russian higher schools as sources of general (vs. profession-oriented) education. Many of those who enter higher schools have no intention to work in the specialty they will major in. Most Russians see higher education as a source of “general education” rather than that of specialty-oriented knowledge and skills. E.g., 59% of St. higher schools are insufficient. At the same time, many respondents who are pessimistic about professionalizing capabilities of Russia’s higher schools, praise their role as sources of general education

7. Demand for higher education *per se*, without linking it to further occupation or employment plans, was noted by Soviet economists and sociologists in the 1970-s. However, until recently it was considered as a deviation from normal social development patterns. We see that phenomenon as a cradle of the new social norms with respect to general education.

8. Survey among students has demonstrated that most students see higher education as a resource that can help them adapt to volatile labor market environment. This conclusion is supported by respondents’ answers to the question about their intentions to enter another graduate program. At least one third of respondents expressed that wish. Thus, “second higher education” that once was an exception to the rule is gradually turning into a commonly-recognized norm.

9. Differences in access to employment opportunities for higher school graduates was not identified as a major problem by respondents. Students only said that well-off graduates had more job opportunities because they had money to bribe people. Most respondents still associate the problem of accessibility of higher education with that of entering a university.