

# **Impact of transformation of the mechanisms of enrolment to universities and financing of higher education on its accessibility**

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## ***Problem***

The conditions of entering universities and terms of payment for higher education applied by the state and population have grown since recently a subject of acute discussions by mass media, higher schools, scientists and authorities. The key theme of discussions on the shortcomings of the existing regulations and purposefulness of wide-range implementation of new mechanisms is proportion between public and private financing of higher education and conditions of its obtaining for budgetary money. But relatively few attention has been paid to discussion of the effect of the existing and proposed mechanisms onto accessibility of higher education for various groups of population. The role of institutional factors (formal and informal rules of enrolment to universities and economic conditions of getting higher education) in reproduction of differences of accessibility of higher education for various social groups hasn't been the subject of any special studies.

## ***Objective***

The purpose of the study was to assess the effect onto accessibility of higher education for various social groups which is exerted by formal and informal rules of entering higher schools and payment for schooling, and can be exerted by the expected changes in the rules of enrolment to higher schools and mechanisms of public and private financing of higher education (introduction of the national exam and public nominative financial obligations ("GIFO")).

## ***Methodology***

The study has been based on a combination of methods of economic and legal, institutional and qualitative sociological analysis.

*Information base* of the study was made of rules and regulations for enrolment to higher schools and financing of higher education, published results of the experiment of introduction of national exam and GIFO, as well as data on practical activities of regional universities obtained from polling their employees.

Let's look closer at the description of the poll. The object of the study were universities located in three regions of Russian Federation. They are located in different federal districts, including the European and Asian part of Russia.

Region A is one of the few regions where the experiment of implementation of national exam and GIFO was carried out in 2002. The experiment of national exam was carried out in 2002 in regions B, too.

For the purpose of our study, it has been decided to select the regions diametrically opposite as per their degree of openness of higher-education system. Universities in open region B are inter-regional leaders in rendering services of high-quality higher education in the regions. On the contrary, the systems of higher education in regions A and C have low degree of communication with other areas, and inter-regional flows of students are insignificant with respect to total number of students in the region (the share of students coming from other areas is small). Pilot regions are substantially different as per their level of gross regional product per capita.

Employees of the following universities have been interviewed in the pilot regions:

- classical university;
- technical university;
- pedagogical university;
- private university.

On each public university, 10-12 employees were interviewed, including the rector, one or two pro-rectors, responsible secretary of selection committee, deans, heads of sub-faculty and professors from two or three departments opposite as per their prestige. In private universities, 2-4 employees took part in the study. In total, 101 interviews were done from April to June 2003.

## ***Findings***

The study makes it possible to draw the following conclusions:

1. Formal and informal rules of enrolment to universities and payment for education exert clearly pronounced influence on accessibility of various segments of higher education for representatives of various social groups.

2. From the viewpoint of the conditions of organization of selection of students, the professions for which higher schools accept students may be divided into three big groups:

- «low-competition», low-prestige (competition below 2 applicants per vacancy);
- «medium-competition», medium-prestige (competition from 2 to 5 applicants per vacancy);
- «high-competition», high-prestige (competition above 5 applicants per vacancy).

Summarizing the assessments by the higher school employees set forth during the interviews, the following conditions of enrollment to universities on competitive basis can be stipulated.

Low-prestige professions can be accessed only having more or less good knowledge of the secondary school program without spending money for additional preparation. First of all, these are physical, mathematical and complicated technical professions. Relatively small part of the entrants having selected such professions are talented and well prepared pupils who had consciously made their choice. However most of the entrants to such professions are those who have few chances to enter for any other profession. Low-competition professions are rather easily available for school-leavers from low-income families and rural areas.

To enter medium-prestige professions, it is required:

- either good results at secondary school;
- or training at preparatory courses;
- or training with coach, but not the most expensive ones.

These professions are available for rural population on condition of special-purpose selection or ability of paying for training at preparatory courses.

High-competition professions are available on the following conditions:

- schooling in a lycee or other specialized secondary school for at least two years;
- training with coaches during two years, as a rule, with those who guarantee enrolment;
- informal payment for enrolment.

Expenses required for each of the above ways turn to be comparable.

3. The existing formal rules of selection and payment for education combined with minimum public supervision of their implementation give universities big opportunities for shaping their policy of selection as they need. Real content of the rules of selection to different universities and professions, prevalence of informal exchanges at enrolment to university and during education are determined by the university (profession) prestige, its economic status and policy of its management. All this entails differentiation of opportunities of entering university for different social groups and segmentation of the tertiary education system as per accessibility features.

4. The interest of the highly prestigious universities and departments is to attract entrants from high-income and high-status groups. This is supported by real rules of selection and payment for education.

Medium-prestige universities and departments taking care of reproduction of their prestige and education quality are interested in identifying talented youth and oriented to selecting considerable part of the entrants by real competitive selection.

Low-prestige universities and departments looking for not more than survival are oriented to attract children from rural areas and small towns, which would be ready to learn low-prestige professions. That is the reason for their activity in developing preparatory training.

In universities with poor economic status, where professors have few alternatives of earning, management hardly cares of development of practices of informal payment for services of selection and education.

5. Wide-spreading of practices of informal payment for selection for budgetary vacancies (bribes for enrolment) is inversely proportional to population living standard in the region. The lower income level in the region is, the more wide-spread practices of informal practices are.

6. Monetary relationships during education in universities progressively spread wider. They cover not only payment for school books, accommodation, meals, transport fees, but also include shadow payments for passing tests, examinations, course and graduation theses, etc. The fact there are pay services and informal payments in universities is not a factor substantially restricting the opportunities for successful graduation. The level of wide-spreading of informal payments depends on the level of earnings of professors, opportunities for them to get other income in addition to teaching, and peculiarities of sub-cultures existing in departments and sub-faculties.

7. Preservation of the existing rules of selection and payment for education individually tuned by universities reproduces the situation of differentiation of the opportunities for various social groups to get higher education. Introduction of new uniform rules of selection and payment appropriate application of which could be assured by the State is a necessary tool for “breaking down” the existing segmentation of the opportunities of getting higher education for various social groups and equalizing their chances.

8. At the same time, the study has shown the professors and management of universities have low level of confidence with respect to the national exam and its ability to stop informal payments at the entrance. There is also a steady conviction that some mechanisms of adaptation to new environment would be found out anyway. Maximum distrust with respect to the national exam is shown by the universities' professors in where it has not been applied yet.

Professional community has vague understanding of the GIFO mechanism, and the existing system of enrolment to universities and their financing is voluntary or not mythologized. When assessing the GIFO, universities employees make too high demand for it to eliminate all the shortcomings of the existing mechanism of high-school financing, which is hardly feasible.

9. The national exam has not practically affected coach-training activity of professors. An important consequence of national exam system implementation would be high probability of practice of informal payments being shifted from universities to secondary schools, where there are even more favorable conditions for this thanks to closer contacts between parents and teachers than in universities. In addition, it can not be excluded that such practices could move to administrative structures in the regions.

10. The prospects of large-scale implementation of national exam and GIFO mechanisms are differently perceived by the management and personnel of various types of universities. The situation where universities cannot influence selection of their students is uncomfortable for all of them, but the nature of the danger differs.

For the low-prestige universities, the first concern is survival of teaching personnel. The new mechanisms could aggravate stagnation of such universities. However, possible loss of such type of universities would be hardly sensible for the elites at power.

Medium-prestige universities and departments are less concerned with implementation of the national exam and GIFO. Demand for their services would be preserved, external pressure on them from the elites at power and in business is not so intensive for them to fear loss of control over students selection. On the contrary, management of these universities gets a chance to refuse informal support to enrolment of those who is among the periphery of the elites. Furthermore, using the mechanism of special-purpose enrolment, managers of such universities keep the capability of admitting children of those who are actually useful for them.

Highly prestigious, elite universities and departments experience intensive pressure from elites at power and in business. For their management, a situation of uncontrolled selection is extremely dangerous for them, since it bears a risk of considerable devaluation of their social capital. Under the new rules, management of such universities becomes unable to guarantee that, provided certain conditions are met, applicants from the elite social groups will be admitted. In the real system of social connections under which an elite universities operates, such situation is not acceptable for it.

11. The most popular attitude towards national exam is that such examination and accounting of its results at selection for enrolment to universities is useful and pertinent, but only justified in combination with other forms of selection like interview or additional examination organized by higher schools on their own.

Obviously, the mechanism of interview or additional oral examination, on the one hand, allows interested professor to discern talented, but poorly prepared entrants in the crowd and give them pass to a good higher school. However, on the other hand, this mechanism opens big opportunities for pushing "needed" people into university thanks to social links or bribes. Large-scale practical implementation of the proposal on combination of national exam with an entrance test organized by each higher school on its own would lead to dilution of the national exam and GIFO experiments and finally to their failure. If the system of double examinations is preserved in some way, then population will stop supporting national exam and its implementation will become socially and economically inefficient.

12. Attitude of elite universities towards national exam and opportunities of entering them are quite sensible for the elites at power. Therefore, it would be extremely difficult to implement uniform rules of selection only based on national exam results for such universities. At the same time, it is obvious that preservation of the existing rules of selection or implementation of selection basing on national exam results combined with additional entrance test reproduce the situation of minimum availability of these universities for entrants from low-income families, rural areas, etc.

Therefore, it is possible that some compromise decision would be made for the elite universities, for example, establishing a quota for vacancies in such higher schools to be filled in compliance with different rules: one part of the selection upon national exam results only, another part basing on entrance test organized by the higher school on its own, and some part upon the results of Olympiads.

13. In case the existing mechanism of enrolment to higher school is replaced by selection upon the results of national exam only, accessibility of higher education in medium- and highly prestigious universities (departments) would more favorable for particularly talented children from low-income families, rural areas and small towns. But the situation would not improve for entrants belonging to the same social groups able for schooling, but with no outstanding capabilities. Because of lower, as an average, quality of preparation of school-leavers in rural areas and small towns, they would have lower marks at national exam than children from big cities, and only enter a higher school on condition of full or partly payment of schooling.

In fact, the results of national exam's and GIFO's experiments realized in 2002 do not make it possible to draw non-ambiguous conclusions on better accessibility of higher education for rural inhabitants.

14. No uniform scheme can adequately account for and grade all multitude factors of inequality with respect to opportunities of getting higher education due to social and economic reasons, which can not be influenced by the representatives of various groups of population<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, reforming of the mechanisms of enrolment to universities and their financing by implementing national exam and GIFO must be complemented with other tools for improving accessibility of higher education.

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<sup>1</sup> First of all, the existing inequality of the opportunities of entering higher school due to inequality of schooling potential of secondary schools located in different areas and inequality of income is meant.