

Regional educational networks in focus of accessibility of higher education: new exclusions or new possibilities

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Problem

System of secondary schools, colleges and vocational schools supervised by higher education institutions must be closely examined as a route of the modern development of the education system as deserving most keen attention. 50% of all schools and colleges in Nizhny Novgorod Region (the investigations which were used as a foundation to this project) and 70% in Nizhni Novgorod have contracts with higher education institutions. Huge scales of propagation of specialized education make the opposition between supervised (“elite”) and mass schools gradually becomes senseless. There are no implications however that the system of supervised secondary schools has lost the influence on availability of higher education. The development of the system resulted in opening of a great number of special classes, establishment of new bonds and new types of differentiation. Graduates of outsider schools who were embraced by that bondage found themselves in a most vulnerable position. The same refers to schools that could use systems (networks) with low standards of educational services.

Objectives and methodology

The regional educational pattern as prescribed by the problem to study was reconstructed to allow for existing ties among schools and colleges in Nizhny Novgorod Region. The scope was not confined to the description of the existing forms and practices of cooperation. The analyses of most common types of joint effort and evaluation of the efficiency proceeding from the extension of availability of higher education were also included.

This scope called for the employment of network methods to understand relationships of higher education institutions with their supervised schools, colleges, vocational schools as educational networks.

Research object were educational networks of the Nizhny Novgorod State University (NNSU) and educational networks of the Nizhegorodski Branch of the State University-Higher School of Economy (NB SU-HSE).

NNSU is one of oldest and largest higher education institution in the province. Every year 1 400 internal freshmen are enrolled. The university also pioneered the establishment of school for talented children in the city proper and outside. Educational network of the university encompasses over 50 schools and colleges within the limits of the province. To this date this is the most extended network in the region.

The second selected object was NB SU-HSE as the youngest state university set up in 1996. It is also attributed to top “elite” universities. The annual enrollment is 100 internals only. Despite the young age NB SU-HSE succeeded in developing a network of 19 supervised secondary schools in the city of Nizhny Novgorod. Currently this university retains the lead over any other universities in tempos of the development educational networks of supervised schools.

Sampling of supervised secondary schools and colleges was applied for either of the selected institutions where follow up fill-in-the-form polling of senior pupils was done. As a reference senior pupils were selected from schools with no relationships to higher education

institutions. The polling encompassed 850 senior pupils from 29 schools and 8 colleges of the city and province. The returns were compared with polls result with freshmen of NNSU and NB SU HSE (total sampling 350). Empirical data were collected by interviewing school managers who have contracts with the two universities. Total number of interviews was 23.

Results

Terms of cooperation of individual schools and colleges with universities differed substantially. Important elements of differentiation were costs of education, supervision rights on the part of universities, the extent of feed back mechanisms, availability of preferences, keeping active contact to the universities and the duration of such contacts. The most important indicator to count was however the availability of opened specialize classes. The extent of the above factors across schools of various types was different. All schools may be split into three groups according to the proximity to the university.

The ring next to the universities included those who had the best conditions for work: free education in specialized classes with universities' professors, constant performance control followed by including pupils into the general rating system, providing certain preferences for entering a respective university. Most close to the center (university) were city secondary schools and colleges and their counterparts from "satellite" cities round Nizhny Novgorod. 68% of the above schools had contracts with the universities.

The farthest ring was composed of high schools with most disadvantaged for children and parent terms of cooperation like: higher than in the first ring payment for the services of university professors, optional system of classes, irregularity of classes, absence of university supervision and of preferences for entering a university. The farthest ring primarily invites schools and colleges from remote rural areas. Primary vocational schools join the outsiders. Two thirds of them had never cooperated with higher education institutions. Cooperation index of schools and vocational schools on the other hand was only one third.

And finally the mid ring including those in some factors stay closed to the privileged secondary schools, vocational schools and colleges while other factors remind of disadvantaged schools and colleges.

The research indicated that the position of a school in the network in many respects defined educational strategies of the graduates as well as the format and costs of the pre-entrance training. Schools and colleges from the proximity circle are featured by a high entrance ratio of pupils going to universities (up to 100%). This is provided by increased extra curricula classes and consequently by costs of pre-entrance training. The proximity circle secures privileged terms of education and entrance but in the same time confines the choice of children to the institution where privileges are guaranteed. However the higher education motivation of pupils is so high that they would rather change their professional plans than quit the school or college education in which would guarantee the entrance to the university. Such situation is contributed by the lack inter-scholar mobility. Other breaks are engaged by instructions of supervised school principals to retain in final years classes practically all pupils.

Cooperation of secondary schools, colleges and vocational schools of the farthest circle with universities generated higher ambitions of pupils in terms of getting higher education. Openly unequal versus the first circle terms of cooperation do not allow some of the pupils implement claims. Entrants from the farthest circle schools spend as a result much more effort and money as they depend mainly on chargeable education and consider their standards of knowledge insufficient to compete for free budgeted places.

Still more vulnerable were the entrants from schools and colleges which stayed outside any of the education networks along with those schools who used networks with low graded educational services.

It is clear that problems of supervised secondary schools, colleges and vocational schools stretch much farther than quoted here. Obscure image of the supervised schools' and colleges' status shows that networks developed by higher education institutions as shaped to this time belong to a phase-in and further development will entail more changes both in schools and in vocational education. The researchers and participating expert see two routes of development. First is to confine cooperative efforts of universities to the proximity ring alone with a view to consolidate "elite" educational networks. The second route leads to the development of accessible educational complexes to take specialization responsibilities from schools while colleges and vocational schools will dismiss the burden of additional classes in general educational classes.