

Factors determining accessibility of complete higher education at an elite higher education institution: example of the Lomonosov Moscow State University

**Project team: I.G. Teleshova (Project Director),
O.S. Chudinovskikh, M.V. Denisenko, M.B. Denisenko, Y.V. Donets**

Lomonosov Moscow State University

Problem

Projects that investigate various social groups' opportunities for *entering* universities tend to overlook another important problem – that is, students' further stay at their universities and, most importantly, their opportunities to graduate. It is traditionally assumed that all those who enter a university are then provided with equal opportunities and that their further behaviors and life strategies are determined by personal talents, diligence, awareness, etc. However, entering a university provides only a theoretical opportunity to overcome social and economic inequalities. Only a complete higher education gives certain (potential) advantages to the graduate. It is a well-known fact that students start getting expelled during the first several months of enrollment. Also, taking a leave by the student may also be an indirect indication of the difficulties that he or she has encountered at the university.

The problem of interrupted higher education¹ has diverse manifestations. Firstly, some students fail to adapt to the new environment (as in the case of students who are not residents of the territory where the university is located). Secondly, some students get disappointed with their choice of university and apply to another institution. Thirdly, economic conditions in some students' families deteriorate and, as a result, the student has to change the form of education (e.g., shifting from full time to evening or by-correspondence / distance learning arrangements) or to discontinue enrollment, if the family can no longer afford to pay tuition fees.

Objectives

We assumed that the probability of interruption of education at an university may be influenced by multiple factors related to unequal access. The latter may include: living with the family vs. at a dormitory, place of birth, free-of-charge vs. chargeable education, full-time vs. part-time / extension / distance form of education², or student's social origin.

Main objectives of our study included:

- To identify possible cause-effect relations between the probability of expulsion before completion of a degree program and parameters that reflect inequalities in students' starting positions at the point of entry;

¹ Most students who choose or have to interrupt their enrollment resume it after some time. However, this implies loss of time and considerable delays in completing a degree program. Interruptions may have a negative impact on the student's progress after resumption.

² We discovered that the Moscow State University had canceled or dramatically reduced the scope of evening (part-time) degree programs at many of its schools during the last decade. Among all analyzed MSU's schools, that form of education is still offered only by the School of Economics which admits only 50 students per year to its evening/part-time degree program division. Therefore, we have opted not to investigate the impact of this factor on the graduation rate.

- To offer institutional tools to support economically and socially vulnerable students and to minimize the incidence of discontinuation/termination of their enrollment in a degree program.

In other words, our research was designed to identify factors determining access to higher education programs at an elite university. To accomplish this task we had to:

- 1) Review regulations and policies governing delivery of education by Russian public university;
- 2) Assess the number of those admitted vs. that of those expelled;
- 3) Categorize expelled students by reason / grounds for expulsion;
- 4) Assess the risk of expulsion for various student categories sorted by gender, place of residence at the time of entry (locals vs. non-residents), source of tuition fee payment (public budget vs. out-of-pocket payments) and form of education;
- 5) Analyze higher education experts' views on the causes of "rotation" among university students and the need for intervention;
- 6) Survey students of various specializations to find out their views on opportunities and barriers to getting a complete (degree) higher education at an elite university.

The Moscow State University (MSU) has been selected as an example of *an elite university*. As we see it, an elite university: must have high domestic and international ratings; its graduation certificate (diploma) must be recognized internationally; it must be providing best quality services and products; entrance competition must be intense; the institution's graduates must be highly demanded by the market; such institution must have scientific schools, high-quality curricula and appropriate material/technical resources.

Methodology

We have analyzed federal, regional and internal policies of university and by-laws that govern admittance, delivery of educational processes, graduation and expulsion from university. Our project has developed and analyzed an original empirical data base encompassing three complementary components: interviews with experts (heads and staff members of MSU school divisions in charge of studies and service delivery); data obtained through "MSU's Student", an automated information system and; findings of a questionnaire-based student survey. We believe that, when used in combination, these three sources of information can help researchers avoid a one-dimensional vision of the problem and answer the core question of the study: which factors increase the risk of interruption or expulsion, and which factors optimize access to completed higher education at an elite university?

In order to make the sample more representative, information was collected at natural-science and humanitarian MSU schools (faculties) (Schools of Physics, Biology, Geology³, as well as Philology, Philosophy and Economics⁴).

The goal of in-depth interviews with MSU's administrators was to find out their views and perceptions regarding accessibility of complete higher education at an elite university. Our respondents included Deputy Deans (Studies), Heads of Studies Divisions and Course Inspectors experienced in educational process management and working with students. The interviews were

³ School of Biology and School of Geology are also known as "field schools".

⁴ School of Economics is of especial interest and relevance to the project, since it provides a multi-disciplinary education that combines exact and humanitarian sciences and has been demonstrating intense entrance competition for decades. Also, it provides more chargeable services than any other MSU's division.

audio-taped and were conducted using a pre-developed discussion guide. All in all, 24 experts have been interviewed.

The survey covered 1320 students of the full-time sections, excluding those of graduation year.

Findings

1. Most experts agree that MSU is an elite university. This perception is directly associated with the scope and quality of educational services the university is providing.

2. According to our expert respondents, elite higher education is accessible for all who choose their future profession of their own free will and start getting ready for admission in advance. High share of nonresident students, outcomes of field entrance examination commission's sessions, availability of printed materials for entrants and effective preparatory courses delivered at MSU schools demonstrate that MSU's administration is striving to make higher education accessible to entrants from all walks of life.

3. MSU's administrators believe that complete higher elite education is accessible for those who are ready and prepared to enter and study. The chances to win the race are high for those who combine ability to build upon knowledge received at higher school, willingness to learn and diligence.

4. However, our expert respondents do not rule out the influence of student's social well-being on accessibility of complete higher education. They believe that students are reluctant to bring up this issue when their cases are being considered by the Expulsion Commission.

5. Expulsion from a university is an extreme measure that MSU's administration has to take against absentees and weak students. However, many expelled students try to reenter within the next 5 years. Most often, students get expelled on the grounds of poor progress or – more rarely – illness or personal decision to discontinue.

6. Sixty (School of Geology) to 80 (School of Economics) percent of all students graduate on time⁵. Most commonly used reason for expulsion is poor progress which sometimes gets disguised in an Expulsion Order as “student's personal wish to discontinue”⁶. That is why “personal wish to discontinue” is the second common reason for expulsion which accounts for 12 (School of Economics) to 24 (School of Biology) percent of all expulsion cases.

7. According to respondents, students' progress hinges upon: personal abilities (4.53 points on a 5-point scale) and interest in disciplines taught (4.46 points). Students see “parents' connections and acquaintances” as a factor that is not important or negligible (1.83 points).

Students believe that expulsion is mainly a result of personal qualities (or the lack of those), including inability to learn or work under pressure, a lack of self-discipline and laziness (4.16 points). Economic factors ranked second: a) the need to work in order to support parents and relatives and provide for yourself (3.63), b) deterioration of financial status of the student's family resulting in the family's inability to pay tuition fees (3.42 points).

⁵ Data on each cohort of those who entered and graduated shows that fluctuation of the share of graduates in the overall number of enrollees is negligible. That has allowed us to calculate the mean value for the entire analyzed period.

⁶ Analysis of existing legislation and regulations has shown that there are no regulations in place to govern procedures for expulsion, reentry or transfer students. Such rules are usually set by each institution's administration and leave room for subjective decisions in each specific case. Comparison shows that at MSU schools where administrators practice liberal attitudes towards students officially-formulated grounds for expulsion are “less strict” than those used at “less liberal” schools.

According to students, being a non-Moscow resident at the time of admission does not really increase the risk of being expelled from the university. However, objective calculations performed using “MSU’s Student” database, as well as experts’ statements show that the share of those who fail to graduate on time or drop out is higher among students who are not Moscow residents.