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A High Participation System of Higher Education: Does It Provide Equal Opportunity? (0192)

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The expansion of higher education systems is a world-wide phenomenon and crucial to their development (Altbach 2009). In certain countries the majority of age cohort participates in higher education (World Bank, OECD statistics). This includes advanced market oriented systems such as the USA, Australia and Korea; highly developed egalitarian countries of Nordic Europe; and certain transitional Post-Socialist nations in Eastern Europe and the former USSR, including Russia.

In Russia national discussion of this huge enlargement of the system has mostly focused on academic standards and quality, with little said about social and educational equity. Access to higher education is not on the policy agenda, more so given the country is experiencing demographic decline in the relevant age cohorts, enhancing apparently universal participation.

What does ‘universal’ participation mean in social terms, in general and in Russia? The objective of the study is to explore theoretical conceptions of the massification of higher education, in relation to (a) the process of massification under Post-Soviet educational reform in Russia, and (b) the implications of massification, in Russia and perhaps in more general terms, for expanding educational opportunities, and for educational equity.

Theoretical framework

In the early 1970s American sociologist Martin Trow elaborated on three aspects of higher education growth – the rate of growth, change in the absolute size both of systems and institutions, and changes in the proportion of the relevant age cohort enrolled in (Trow 1972, 1973, 2006). Trow recognized the persistence of elite sectors but failed to systematize the dynamics of social stratification and mobility under high participation. Schofer and Meyer (2005) found expansion is partly driven by broader rationales like scientization, democratization and the expansion of human rights. Other sociologists suggest that in a mass system, the differentiation of higher educational institutions forms different tracks, fostering or blocking social mobility. The sociological model of effectively maintained inequality suggests that once a given level of educational saturation is achieved, inequalities in the probability of accessing higher education are replaced by inequalities in the probability of accessing more selective tracks (Lucas 2001, Ayalon and Shavit 2004). In a universal system, social justice means not the accessibility of higher education as such, but the accessibility of higher education with certain characteristics, produced within different kind of institutions. The question is not ‘access?’ but ‘access to what?’. This is currently being asked in North America, Europe, Asia and Russia (e.g. Bastedo and Gumport 2003, Eggins 2010, Shishkin 2004).

The economic approach produces ideas and practical outcomes consistent with sociological analysis. The common New Public Management model assumes that higher education can operate as a market. Higher education becomes a positional good which provides its holders with relative advantage in competition for labor market position and social status (Hirsch 1976). This emphasizes the dynamics of educational competition, the absolute scarcity of

advantageous/prestigious social positions, and the mechanisms for distributing relative advantage. The positional goods notion also points to the declining status of credentials as long as the number of educated people with a given level of credential grows. Massification is associated with not just inflation in the number of credentials but downward movement in, and greater stratification of, their social value.

Collins (1979, 2002) notes that massification and credentialism are a self-reproducing process generated by the congruence of public pressure to expand access of the population to higher education, and the interest of non-elite HEIs in enlarging size and social reach (and in most nations enlarging revenues from government or student tuition). Elite producers are protected from economic competition, while the mass sector is locked into producing lower status positions (Marginson 1997). The growing gap between elite and mass sectors, in prestige and spending, generate further inequalities in the value of credentials from different HEIs (Carnoy 2011).

Modes of inquiry and data sources

The empirical part of the paper explores the origin and process of massification in Russia, conditioned by the historical legacy of mass education in the 1970sUSSR, structural transformation of the economy, high rates of return to higher education, the social status of non-manual occupations and professions, the drive for social mobility in society (Gimpelson, Kapelyushnikov 2011, Konstantinosvsky 2008, WCIOM 2011), and neo-liberal reform. Rapid post-Soviet massification was largely facilitated by the introduction of user fees in the public sector.

How has high participation affected educational equity? Few studies discuss this theme. Research suggests the incidence of educational inequality is much the same as in Soviet times. The social and cultural capital of the family, place of residence, and student gender remain important (Konstantinovky 1999, 2008, Roschina 2006, Shishkin 2004). One way to develop a closer empirical understanding and situate the case of Russia comparatively is to use data from a recent national student survey and other sources; national survey data on educational background and social class of the parents of students; national and international statistics on participation rates and educational attainment; and international data and research on the educational background and social class of students' parents (differentiating on the basis of the probability of participation), enabling comparative analysis between Russia and Europe (Clancy 2010, Haaristo, Orr, Little 2012).

Expected findings and significance

The paper will identify the nationally-specific dynamics of massification in Russia. Within this system with its (in Trow's terms) universal access, there are high social disparities. The social position of higher educated social groups is continuously reproduced. Massification has led to high stratification. The elite sector is small and self-maintained. Massification mostly means the expansion of mass, non-elite, low-tier higher education. The Russian system is among those with the highest inequalities in educational access. Some other universal access systems demonstrate much more equitable opportunities (e.g. Finland, Slovenia). There are no universal laws here.

The paper will also suggest analysis of other implications of universal stage of massification, including educational quality in the mass sector, the organisation/design of systems with high participation, the social structure of a society where most of population has higher education, the role of international education as a positional good, and related phenomena.

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