

UDC 330.567.2/.4

LBC 65.05

© Aleksandrova O.A., Nenakhova Yu.S.

Education opportunities for the population in the changing socio-economic context *



**Olga A.
ALEKSANDROVA**

Doctor of Economics, Leading Scientific Associate at the RAS Institute of Social and Economic Studies of Population



**Yuliya S.
NENAKHOVA**

Junior Scientific Associate at the RAS Institute of Social and Economic Studies of Population

Opportunities for the people in the field of education are not just an indicator of achieved social progress, but also a factor that determines the path of future development. That is why the information about the accessibility of quality education for residents of Russia, which is on the difficult way from socialism to capitalism, is so important. Reforms in education were implemented during the whole post-Soviet period, but the most fundamental changes have occurred in recent years. The paper is based on the analysis of evolution of educational legislation in relation to each of the stages of education system, and it also uses the results of sociological research. The article shows the process of further exacerbating and institutionalization of inequality of educational opportunities for families with different incomes and places of residence. It proves that in the emerging socio-economic and institutional context the access to the full value education for a significant share of households is being increasingly restricted. It excludes the system of education from the list of effective tools for social mobility and aggravates the degradation of human capital of territories. As a result, socio-economic stagnation is conserved. Negative tendencies can be overcome, if the federal government reconsiders its point of view on social overhead costs. Nowadays such costs are considered as nonproductive and, because of that, they are

* The article was prepared in the framework of the RFBR (Russian Foundation for Basic Research) project No.13-06-00273 "Transformation of Russia's population: "Taganrog-II", a quarter of a century later".

“optimized” as much as possible. Also serious changes are needed in the inter-budgetary relations. Primarily, the government should put an end to the practice of shifting the burden of unbearable expenditure commitments to the regions, because this leads to the situation, when regional authorities in implementing even good ideas – like raising the salaries of teachers – are often forced to use measures, that result in a reduction in the quality of education and the increase of budget debt. The state can find the funds, necessary to carry out more efficient social and regional policies, if it abandons the practice of accumulating unreasonably high volumes of proceeds from the sales of Russian energy resources in the so-called reserve funds.

Education, regional development, human potential, availability, quality, social progress, education reform, education system.

The opportunities of the population in the sphere of education are, on the one hand, a relevant indicator of achieved social progress, and on the other – a predictor of the course of further development. It is not by accident that education issues are always in the focus of the research into the level and quality of life of the population in a given region. That is why it would be very interesting to study this issue more comprehensively in the framework of longitudinal research into the life of the population of a typical Russian city for more than forty-year period, one half of which Russia had spent in the socialist stage, and the second half – in the period of formation of capitalism.

So, as a result of implementation of the famous “Taganrog” project¹, since 1968, the data were obtained about the availability of educational institutions of different stages for the population of this city, about the educational strategies of different social groups, for instance, in the field of preschool educational establishments, population’s concern about obtaining a university degree and so on².

¹ One of the founders and the longstanding project supervisor – RAS Corresponding Member N.M. Rimashevskaya.

² For example, in the framework of “Taganrog-II” (1986), the chapter on free-of-charge and preferential services dwelled upon the services related to the education of preschool-age children, extracurricular activities, education of the youth and adults; the chapter also analyzed the trends observed over the period since the previous calculation; in the framework of “Taganrog-IV” (1996) a special section was devoted to the quality of human potential, an important component of which is knowledge; in the framework of “Taganrog-IV”, (1998) the students’ families were discussed, among other things.

The data obtained in the Soviet period, indicated gradual expansion of education accessibility. The number of children attending pre-school establishments was growing, which, by the way, indicated not only the increasing number of kindergartens, but also, indirectly, the improvement of the quality of life, as it was explained, in addition, by reduction in the number of multigenerational families under the conditions of intensive housing construction. The decision about enrolling in a university depended not on financial opportunities but rather on family attitudes, in particular, there was a tendency to value higher education more in the families of the Soviet intelligentsia [9].

Radical changes of the 1990s had a substantial impact on educational opportunities of population. The data collected during the implementation of the project in these years revealed the sharp reduction in the availability of pre-school institutions due to their large-scale closing down. The availability of additional education for children was limited as well, due to the fact that more and more extracurricular activities were provided on a paid basis. In addition, the data proved that the free-of-charge secondary education was becoming a mere formality, because people had to pay for school repairs, security and other school needs, they also had to buy textbooks; there was a sharp increase in the number of paid services provided by the system of higher education as well. Such changes in education sphere lead to a sharp differentiation of educational institutions, to

the reduction in the quality of higher education, to the increase in the number of young people with deviant behavior [5].

The decade that passed since the implementation of the last stage of the project is characterized by increasing intensity and scope of reforms in education sphere. The legislation on education has been slightly amended throughout the 2000s, but the most fundamental changes have been made in the past few years. Several laws entered into force: the Law “On education in the Russian Federation” (2012), the Law No.83-FL “On the introduction of amendments to certain legislative acts of the Russian Federation in connection with the improvement of the legal status of state (municipal) institutions” (2010) that radically changes the order of financing of educational institutions; the federal state educational standards (FSES) were adopted; Unified State Exams (USE) were finally introduced in schools (2009), and the stage-wise Bologna model in universities. At that, educational policies in recent years can be briefly characterized as follows: during the entire post-Soviet period, education was steadily moving in the direction opposite to equalizing educational opportunities for families with different incomes and places of residence; as for the 2000s, they witnessed a further aggravation of this process and its consistent institutionalization. Let us illustrate this using the example of each of the steps of education system, and we will start with pre-school education.

In recent years, certain attempts have been undertaken to handle the problem of shortage of places in pre-school establishments, aggravated in the 2000s due to a certain increase in birth rate and inflow of migrant workers and shortage of kindergartens due to the sharp reduction in their number in the 1990s; these attempts, however, can in no way be assessed as social progress. The ways to solve the problem included the following: firstly, the legalized

relaxation in the sanitary, hygienic and other requirements to the maintenance of children in pre-school institutions (abandonment of separate places for having meals etc.), increase in the number of pupils per kindergarten teacher and other similar measures, and secondly, promotion of the development of private, “economy class” kindergartens [6]. However, the latter provides only baby sitting (with less strict requirements for child care), and the most important educational function is not implemented, which negatively affects the following, school stage of education.

Another step toward the restriction of availability of full-fledged pre-school education is made in the new law on education (2012). In particular, at the federal level the standard that determined the maximum payment for child’s maintenance in the kindergarten has been abolished under the pretext of splitting the two functions of pre-school institutions: education (which is still proclaimed to be free) and care (which is paid by parents) in the conditions of sharp increase in the payment for this social service. At present, such decisions have been left to the discretion of regions with their scarce budget capacities.

The situation in the sphere of general education is as follows: the 1990s–2000s witnessed the deterioration of its quality mainly due to lingering shortage of financial support to schools; in the recent years, however, provision of education services on a paid basis has been expanding and, what is more, it is becoming legalized. At present, we are talking not only about the known fact that parents provide financial contributions to different school needs and hire tutors for their indolent children, or, on the contrary, for the children who intend to enter the best universities. We are also talking about the fact that families have to replenish out of their own resources the scarcity of state-guaranteed free-of-charge segment of general education, in other words, the number

of classes that are determined by educational standards for the study of certain subjects. It happened when the Federal Education Agency, after almost two decades of struggling, obtained the authority to develop and approve educational standards.

There have been numerous attempts to transfer school education partly on a fee-paying basis. In 1997–1998 in the framework of an education concept developed by the government, it was proposed to introduce school tuition fees in the amount of 20% of the cost of education – under the guise of providing additional educational services. The response of the public did not allow this idea to be implemented then. Therefore, the idea of introducing partial tuition fees in schools was voiced again in 2004, when the Minister of Education A. Fursenko suggested the basic curriculum be reduced at a quarter, this time under the slogan of reducing educational load (solvent families were offered to pay for “additional” classes from their own resources, low-income families were promised to be provided with a subsidy). The protests of educational community forced the Minister to refuse that he had anything to do with these ideas. But in 2006 such proposals were revived along with the idea of the so-called education “before school”, which disguised an attempt of actual elimination of the right to the free pre-school education. This attack was repelled once again, but the transition of educational institutions to normative per capita financing was imposed as a compromise [11].

Not to mention the apparent controversy of the very idea of per capita financing, the practice indicates that standards are calculated not in accordance with the real needs of educational institutions, but on the basis of the limit of funds, which are to be allocated for education. Moreover, since schools have been transferred to per capita financing, even these scanty standards are being reduced [3]. In these conditions, schools are forced,

on the one hand, to increase the number of pupils per class beyond limits; to agree to merge with other educational institutions, often significantly different in the level of teaching and composition of pupils (including those requiring the correction of behavior or treatment of health); to reduce the teaching staff and support staff (speech therapists, psychologists, etc.). And on the other hand, schools have to try to provide as many paid services as possible, which is additionally stimulated by the already mentioned Law No.83-FL and educational standards that significantly reduce the number of classes required for teaching the subjects necessary for university admission.

Today this situation is further aggravated by the fact that the regions are to implement the tasks set out in the inaugural presidential decrees that provide for the increase of schoolteachers’ salaries to the average salary for the region. Note that the previous law “On education” (1992) already set out the requirement to pay salaries to teachers at the level not lower than average wages in industry, however, the government simply ignored it, and in 2005 the notorious law No.122-FL dated August 22, 2004³ abolished this requirement at all [7]. At present, due to acute shortage and aging of teaching staff, the task of raising teachers’ salaries was firstly stated in the decrees of the President, and then set out in the new law on education. However, the research that we have conducted in four regions, the goal set by the federal centre is achieved in the regions mainly through the following means: increasing the per-class workload and extra-curricular workload of teachers, and the number of students in a class; freezing financial allocations for repair and technical equipment

³ This law became widely known as the “law on monetization of benefits”. However, it also introduced significant changes in the legislation that regulates other spheres, including education system.

of schools; teacher training and through other “internal reserves”. And the reason for it lies in inadequately low value of per capita standard in general and teachers’ salary⁴ (rate) as its component.

Today, the school is placed in such conditions that cannot but affect the quality of education, as well as accessibility of higher education for those population groups that are unable to pay for extracurricular classes. For instance, according to the school principals that took part in our survey, about one third of the students in the places of their residence have no opportunity to take up paid lessons⁵; the population expresses even more pessimistic views: only half of city residents are ready to pay for education under the dramatic increase in paid services in education sphere. All this is happening in the conditions when the vast majority of school principals argue that after the transition to the new FSES, one will not be able to enter the university without taking additional paid classes [4]. Besides, according to FSES, those students, who have not chosen Mathematics or Natural Sciences as their specialization, are to take up the so-called “natural science”, an integrated course that gives the most superficial knowledge of fundamental sciences instead of individual subjects like Physics, Chemistry, Biology. In such conditions, untimely specialization that is also stipulated in educational standards interferes with students in the future, when they have more precisely determined their vocation, and demands of economy for entering the university.

⁴ Field studies were conducted in the summer of 2013 under the auspices of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. 1149 teachers and 37 school principals took part in the survey in 4 regions that differ in economic prosperity. The detailed research results are to be published in the next issue of the journal “Narodonaseleniye”.

⁵ School principals argue that the similar number of students will limit themselves to free-of-charge classes, as they consider it sufficient, despite the fact that the population is poorly informed about the changes in the volume and content of the free-of-charge segment of the general education.

Financial and economic situation, which schools and supplementary education establishments for children have to face in recent years, forces them to reduce significantly the number of free-of-charge study groups and courses, thereby discriminating children from low-income families with regard to the opportunities of out-of-school activities and development.

Now let us briefly review the state of affairs in primary and secondary vocational education. It is known that given a relative accessibility of higher education, entering a university has become the dominant strategy of the population. The more so since the absolute majority of employers demand that their employee have a university degree; although under the current structure of the economy, in most cases such diploma is required by employers only as evidence of the employee’s minimum level of skills and culture, rather than the set of specialized knowledge. University students are provided with draft deferment, it also contributes to the intention to obtain higher education. The factor determining the absence of interest in initial and secondary vocational education lies in the lack of demand for working professions and low wages in this sphere. This resulted in further deterioration of the contingent of students in vocational training institution that prepare specialists for industry and agriculture, which also made them unattractive for households. Other factors in the low popularity of such institutions of initial and secondary vocational education are as follows: obsolescence of their facilities and infrastructure due to the situation in the real sector of the economy; deterioration of teaching staff, etc.

With the onset of the crisis in 2008–2009, the speakers from the high rostrums talked about the turn of the economy toward the real sector and, consequently, about the redundancy of graduates of legal-economic and management specializations and about the demand for qualified workers.

At the regional level, the attempts were made to transform the structure of vocational education with the aim of equipping institutions with modern equipment, etc. However, economic policy, which had been making the non-primary sector of the industry unprofitable during the whole post-Soviet period, remained essentially unchanged. Accordingly, there were no changes in the opportunities of enterprises of this sector to offer a salary, capable of competing with remuneration in trade, services and other non-production sectors and, especially, taking into account differences in working conditions in the office and enterprises [2]. Moreover, the recent accession of Russia to the WTO has led to significant decline in many branches of industry and agriculture, which cannot but affect their staffing needs and possibilities of labour incentives.

Let us now take a look at the changes that took place in higher education. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the issue of accessibility of quality higher education for the population has become increasingly important due to the underfunding of universities, forcing them to shift to the path of commercialization, and a simultaneous growth of social differentiation. As a result, a big part of the population had to choose the “availability” of higher education to the detriment of its “quality”.

The standards that established the number of state-funded places at the university in the total number of population (170 students per 10 000 population)⁶, and the ban on the reduction of the number of budget places that were available at the time of adoption of the law⁷ have to some extent curbed the intentions to place the whole education on a fee-paying basis. In 2004, however, the already mentioned law No.122-FL eliminated the ban on the reduction of state-funded places at high schools.

⁶ Regulation of the Federal Law “On education” dated July 10, 1992 No.3266-1.

⁷ Regulation of the Federal Law “On higher and post-graduate professional education” dated August 22, 1996 No.125.

As a result, approximately 750 thousand state-funded places have been reduced over the three of the most “fertile” years (2005–2008). Simultaneously, certain regulations leading to the increase of tuition fees were introduced in the legislation (cancellation of tax benefits for educational institutions beginning from 2006).

Another attempt to reduce the availability of full-fledged higher education to the public, was the compulsory (contrary to the autonomy of universities that was stated in the Declaration) introduction of a multistage system at universities after Russia’s joining the Bologna Declaration (2003). In the 1990s the State Committee of the Russian Federation for Higher Education put forward the proposal, according to which bachelors should account for about 80% of all university graduates; at that time the proposal was not supported by the Parliament. However, it was enshrined in law in 2007, and now the share of state-funded places in master’s degree courses is only 20%. At that, in contrast to European countries where bachelor’s programme does not provide the necessary deep specialization as well, but they have an extensive system of further vocational education; in Russia the opportunities for getting further vocational education are significantly limited, which cannot but affect the quality of education for those who can only afford bachelor’s courses. It may be no accident that in Russia employers prefer not to hire graduates with bachelor’s degree; and parents, particularly those who have obtained good education and know a lot about it, do whatever they can to provide their children with an opportunity to receive master’s degree [1].

In the 2000s the Ministry of Defense also influenced the accessibility of higher education. In 2006 draft deferments connected with higher education were reduced, and deferment was cancelled if a person re-entered the university, it was often done by students with low incomes (first they entered the university

on a fee-paying basis and then tried to transfer to state-funded places). In addition, military deferment for students of initial and secondary vocational education was cancelled, which reduced the likelihood of their graduation from these educational institutions, let alone their transition to higher education level.

In 2012 the Ministry of Education and Science launched the campaign for the elimination of the so-called “inefficient” universities. It is obvious that the previous unrestrained increase in the number of non-state universities, as well as the branch network of universities of different forms of property, etc. has led to disastrous consequences – profanation of higher education and devaluation of the university degree. At the same time, the criteria of “efficiency”, used by the Education Ministry, are inadequate in many respects. It makes the situation with universities, and especially those located in the provinces, rather uncertain. Thus, the very accessibility of higher education for the residents of the periphery is being questioned.

The introduction of the Unified State Exam compulsory for all school graduates is another important innovation implemented in the sphere of education in recent years; it is aimed at equalizing the chances of admission into universities for all children regardless of income qualification and place of residence. However, due to serious flaws in control and measuring materials and substantial influence of corruption on the final result, the achievement of the goals declared with the introduction of the exam remains doubtful. In addition, the most famous higher schools have gained the right to conduct an intramural additional examination, which reduces the possibility of entering the university for those who arrive from remote areas and do not have enough financial resources because of the costs of travel and accommodation.

Finally, the Unified State Exam does not remove those limits for the availability of

universities in big cities that are associated with the excessive cost of living for many people who come from the provinces. Of course, students that are not well off can make some money on the side, but it inevitably affects the quality of education. At that, state financial support to young students even in the 2000s has not returned to the adequate level (recall that in the 1990s the scholarship of a university student in relation to the subsistence level decreased in four times in comparison with the Soviet period, the scholarship of a technical school student – in eight times, that of a vocational school student – in 11 times). While the regulations of basic education laws linked the amount of scholarship to the minimum monthly wage (according to the law on education, a scholarship of vocational school students should be at least one half of the minimum wage; and according to the law on higher and postgraduate education, a scholarship of university students should be not less than two minimum wages), the government did not follow those regulations. And in 2000 a law was passed that established the amount of scholarships in absolute terms (i.e. without reference to the minimum wage).

At the same time, a law was adopted that set a fixed (and not connected with the minimum wage, as was previously stipulated by the law), amount of compensation payments for meals, privileged travel, etc. for students of initial and secondary vocational education institutions.

Moreover, in 2004, the already mentioned law No.122-FL abolished the legal acts stipulating the payments for meals to children from families with low incomes in schools, vocational schools and technical schools, as well as privileged commuting for needy students. All the responsibility for financial support to needy students of non-federal educational institutions was shifted to regions and local government. Simultaneously, all the regulations ensuring the right of students to

travel free-of-charge to the place of study and back, as well as additional payments for meals were completely withdrawn from the law on education [8].

Social scholarships that were established later and that exist currently are very small, and they do not correspond to the actual cost of living; that is why, young people have to work alongside studies, especially those who arrived from elsewhere.

Thus, the analysis of the trends at all levels of education system proves that a significant part of urban households, due to low level of income, has less and less access to quality education. This excludes the system of education from the number of efficient means of social mobility; this fact, firstly, leads to a decrease in the legitimacy of existing social order in the eyes of significant part of the population, and, secondly, it exacerbates the

degradation of human potential of territories, conserving socio-economic stagnation.

The emerging negative trends may be overcome, if the federal centre ceases to regard social expenditures as non-productive (as it has been doing for two decades already) and stops “optimizing” them to the lower limit. Moreover, the high level of credit debt of the majority of regional budgets, to a great extent – to foreign and international lenders, requires comprehensive revision of inter-budgetary relations and, first of all, abandonment of shifting unbearable expenditure obligations to the regions. The state possesses the resources for dealing with these problems: suffice it to say that the aggregate indebtedness of regional budgets by the end of 2012 was equal to 1.3 trillion rubles, that almost matches the amount of proceeds from the sale of Russia’s energy resources that go to the Reserve Fund [10].

References

1. Aleksandrova O.A. Motives for choosing educational strategies on the new stage of reform of higher school. *Vysshee obrazovanie v Rossii*. 2008. No.9.
2. Aleksandrova O.A. Sectoral discrimination as an obstacle to the equality of education. Social function of the state in the economy of the 21st century: reports and speeches: proceedings of the conference at the Economics Department of Moscow State University. Ed. by G.A. Akhinov, V.V. Yelizarov and others. Moscow: MAKS Press, 2007.
3. Aleksandrova O.A., Nenakhova Yu.S. Reform of state-financed institutions and the Russian school: expectations and forecasts. Materials of the International research-to-practice conference “Demographic issues of Russia: a view from the past to the future” (for the 300th anniversary of M.V. Lomonosov). Saint Petersburg: Institute of Sociology, 2011.
4. Aleksandrova O.A., Nenakhova Yu.S. Human potential of Russia and the reform of social sphere. *Narodonaseleniye*. 2012. No.4.
5. Woman, man, family in Russia: the last third of the 20th century. “Taganrog” Project. Ed. by N.M. Rimashevskaya. Moscow: ISESP, 2001.
6. The plan of activities “Changes in social sphere, aimed at improving the efficiency of education and science”. Approved by the RF Government Resolution dated December 30, 2012 No.2620-R. Available at: <http://government.ru/docs/22263/>.
7. Smolin O.N. The new situation in the educational legislation: federal and regional competence. *Voprosy obrazovaniya*. 2005. No.2.
8. Smolin O.N. Education. Policy. Law: the federal legislation as a factor in education policy in modern Russia. Moscow: Kulturnaya revoliutsiya, 2010.
9. Socio-economic problems of national wellbeing (main results of implementation of the “Taganrog-II” Project. Ed. by L.A. Onikov, N.M. Rimashevskaya. Moscow: CEMI USSR Academy of Sciences, 1986.
10. Transcript of the session of the State Duma dated September 18, 2013. The report of the RF Government on execution of the federal budget for 2012. Available at: <http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/node/3918/>.
11. Evolution of the regulatory framework for social reforms. Ed. by Ye.M. Avraamova. Moscow: M-Studio, 2011.