

Russian Higher Education and the Demographic Revolution

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Russia faces significant changes in its higher education system because of rather unique circumstances: an overall decline in the population, but an increase in numbers of university-age youth. Currently, the Russian tertiary education system is one of the world leaders in terms of massification. This is true both in terms of total number of students and gross enrollment ratio. The total number of students in Russia in 2019 was 4.2 million. The percentage of individuals aged 25 to 64 enrolled in tertiary education ranks fourth in the world, behind only South Korea, Japan, and Canada. Such a high enrollment rate is a consequence of the massification of university education that took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The number of universities has doubled over the past 20 years since the establishment of the Russian Federation: At its peak, in 2006, the Russian education system included 1,314 universities (and more than 1,500 branches of these universities).

Unfortunately, the rapid growth in the number of institutions has led to the emergence of a low-quality segment of higher education. To meet this challenge, in 2011, the government launched a special program aiming to optimize university networks. As a result, in 2017, the total number of colleges and universities was halved, while the number of branch campuses fell by 65 percent.

These structural changes coincided with a general reduction of the student population, due to demographic factors. Over this period, the number of students fell by 35 percent. However, the forecast for 2019 indicates again a growth in the population of young people, and this trend is expected to continue over the next 15 years. The relatively fast growth in the number of youth is likely to lead to increasing demand for higher education and will have a significant impact on the system.

A Risk of Decreasing Access

The predicted growth in the population of young people in Russia will lead to a risk of decreasing access to higher education. While the overall population will fall by 3.7 million by 2036, the population of 17 to 21-year-olds is projected to increase, as a result of Russia's emergence from the demographic collapse of the 1990s. The majority of Russian

Abstract

The consequences of demographic revolutions influence the number of potential university applicants and higher education accessibility in Russia. An analysis of current demographic trends, at a time when the number of universities is shrinking, shows a threat of decreasing access to higher education, coupled with high regional differentiation in the availability of education, likely to worsen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and current economic crisis.

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students fall into this age range and their population segment will grow by 15 percent by 2024 and by 45 percent by 2036.

Another important feature is that the majority of high-school graduates continue their education at colleges and universities. Today, more than 70 percent of school graduates choose this path. This means that in the current situation of a substantial decrease in the number of educational organizations combined with a steady demographic growth of youth, educational accessibility may significantly decrease. More school graduates are likely to be pushed into the segment of vocational education.

Regional Differentiation and Differences in Demographics

Regional differentiation within Russia is high and there are major differences in demographic trends across the country. The fact that colleges and universities are located in large cities creates strong incentives for young people to move to these education hubs. Surveys show that people tend to consider large cities as providing higher quality education and offering greater opportunities for personal growth. As a result, only a fourth of Russian regions are attracting young people, whose migration has tripled over the past few years. This is partly a result of the adoption of the “unified state exam” in 2001 (a compulsory exam for everyone planning to enter a university), which has expanded the educational opportunities for applicants to enroll in universities outside of their home region. At the same time, this expansion has led to the draining of young people from most regions, which poses a serious threat to the stability of regional development.

Still, the situation may change in the near future, insofar as most regions are on the verge of experiencing a significant increase in the number of young people. This gives hope that at least some of the young population that has tended to move to more developed centers of education in recent years will now stay in their home regions.

It is also important to consider the effects of demographic trends on Russia’s more attractive cities and regions. One quarter of all students and one third of all universities in the country are concentrated in two cities—Moscow and Saint Petersburg. This uneven geographic distribution of centers of higher learning creates disparities in young people’s educational opportunities. The current demographic trends are posing another challenge to families: increasing competition for places at universities in regions that are experiencing an influx of young people from other regions. Access to higher education will therefore decrease for graduates of high schools in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, as they will be forced to compete with graduates from across Russia.

Conclusion

In Russia, demographic revolutions have a direct impact on access to higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic and current economic crisis are likely to further exacerbate differences in socioeconomic status among young people. The most disadvantaged groups may face the greatest decrease in access to universities. Choosing a strategy of minimizing risks and reducing financial costs, families may redirect on local higher education markets and choose universities within their native regions. But in the current conditions of reduced higher education capacity, especially in remote regions (caused by optimizations of university networks), this can also lead to decreased access.

The government has recently taken a series of steps to even out these growing disparities. One important measure is the increase in the number of federally funded student places, which will rise by 28 percent between 2020 and 2024. This initiative will be specifically targeted at improving access to education in regions outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Other measures aim to expand online education formats and create national platforms for online courses and educational resources. This spread of online education may help improve access and change educational migration patterns. ▲

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