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Abstract

The great expansion of participation in higher education in Russia in the post-Soviet period was the layered and contradictory result of both conditions established in the Soviet period, and the structuring of reforms after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992. The Soviet government was strongly committed to the expansion of education across the country, and gender equality was achieved at that time. In the 1990s and 2000s enrolments more than doubled, though the growth of numbers has been reversed since 2008 because of demographic decline of the relevant age cohorts. Employing Trow's analysis of the growth of higher education systems and Hirsch's concept of positional goods, among other conceptual approaches, as well as statistical, national, and comparative survey data, this paper analyses social dynamics of the process of increasing participation and equalization of opportunity in Russia. The dramatic higher education expansion in Russia was largely associated with the positional value of higher education credentials, in a society in which the Soviet system of social status had been discontinued, and a new system of status was being built on the basis

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of post-Soviet rules (which are still evolving). Driven by family aspirations and resources, massification has largely rested on the part-privatisation of the costs of higher education, part of a neoliberal reform package common to the post-Soviet countries. However, higher education expansion has not brought about greater social equity. Expansion, fee-based financing and policy measures such as university excellence initiatives have tended to strengthen the institutional and social stratification of the higher education system, weakening social mobility and social equality.

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