6 Schooling and Inequalities

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The substantial extension of schooling in the Soviet Union is undoubtedly an impressive achievement of the regime and an important factor contributing to the country's comparatively impressive long-run economic growth performance. But like 'progress' in other areas of Soviet life, the increased educational attainment of the population has generated its own social tensions and problems. In particular, the advance towards 'universal' secondary education has made it necessary to moderate the traditionally ambitious occupational plans of secondary school graduates, and to confront such issues as social inequality in access to higher education and the problem of work discontent among 'overeducated' workers in routine jobs. A brief examination of the structure of the Soviet educational system and of recent changes in the relative importance of its components will set the stage for our discussion of these problem areas.

THE STRUCTURE OF SOVIET EDUCATION

The completion of the eighth grade of the general-education school in the Soviet Union signifies the attainment of an 'incomplete' secondary education (an 'elementary' or 'primary' education corresponds to grades one to three). By the late 1970s the 'obligatory' minimum of eight years of schooling had become wellnigh universal for school-age youngsters (with the number completing the eighth grade in 1978 standing at some 95 per cent of those entering the first grade eight years earlier).¹ The main stress in Soviet educational policy in recent years has been to make a 'complete' secondary education 'universal'. The principal channels through which Soviet youngsters can complete their secondary education—upon finishing the eighth grade—are the following:

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L. Schapiro et al. (eds.), The Soviet Worker
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(1) Continuation of schooling in the ninth grade of the ten-year general-education school. Enrolment in daytime classes of these schools (followed by graduation from the tenth grade) is the path traditionally taken by those aspiring to a higher education. Although most tenth-grade graduates have not gained admission to a higher educational institution (VUZ) in recent years, a large majority of VUZ candidates are drawn from this group. Hence youngsters with comparatively ambitious occupational plans (or whose parents have ambitious plans for them) are likely to continue their secondary education in these schools.

(2) Admission to a specialized secondary school (tekhnikum). For those enrolling in a tekhnikum after completion of the tenth grade, the course of study is one to two years, leading normally to semi-professional occupational status (technician, accountant, agronomist, nurse). For those enrolling after the eighth grade, the course of study is three to four years and encompasses a 'complete' secondary education as well as training in one of the semiprofessional areas cited above. The tekhnikum is the main channel of access to the lower levels of the 'specialist' or intelligentsia stratum, although an increasing proportion of its graduates in recent years have moved into skilled workers' occupations. The tekhnikum, in any case, is a much less likely path to higher education than the general-education school.

(3) Enrolment in a vocational-technical school (proftekhuchilishche) providing training for semi-skilled and skilled workers' occupations. Prior to 1969, the course of study was 12 to 18 months and graduates were not considered to have attained a 'complete' secondary education. Beginning in 1969, an increasing number of these schools have shifted to a three-year course of study which seeks to combine a 'complete' general – secondary education and vocational training in a worker's trade. Graduation from one of these 'secondary vocational-technical schools' is the least likely route to a higher education.

In the late 1970s, more than 90 per cent of the youngsters finishing the eighth grade continued their schooling in one of these 'upper-level' forms of secondary education. An approximate picture of the relative importance of the various channels of post-eighth-grade schooling is given in Table 6.1. Although these figures apply only to the Russian Republic (RSFSR), they may be taken as broadly representative of trends in schooling in the country as a whole. The principal form of