

EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

SECONDARY EDUCATION IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

The length of compulsory education in Hungary, as defined by law in the early sixties, is ten years: it starts at the age of 6 and lasts till the age of 16. The basic institution of compulsory education is the General School ("Általános iskola") which, up to the present, has had two four years long cycles. In the upper four grades of the General School pupils are taught by teachers specialized in a subject. After the completion of this school type (normally at the age of 13–14) pupils continue their studies in one of the following main types of institutions: (a) General secondary schools (Gimnázium), (b) technical secondary schools (Szakközépiskola) or (c) short vocational (trade) schools (Szakmunkásképző). The typical type of full secondary education last four years (from 14 to 18) and short vocational education three years (from 14 to 17), but there are also longer (e.g. 5 years secondary schools) and shorter (e.g. 2 years trade schools) forms.

The definition of secondary education

The term of secondary education designates in Hungary, in general, education provided by schools that receive pupils beyond the age of fourteen, after the completion of the eight years General School. When saying "secondary school" (középiskola) most people think only of the four years general and technical schools offering preparation for the maturity examination (érettségi) and do not put in this category vocational training schools that prepare for a lower level (skilled worker) certificate. One can trace, furthermore, two competing definitions of secondary education. The first definition is connected with the relevant age group: e.g. schools attended by the 13(14–17(18) years old age group are defined as secondary schools. The second definition is connected rather with qualifications: those schools which offer secondary level qualifications are defined as secondary institutions, independently of the age of their pupils or students.

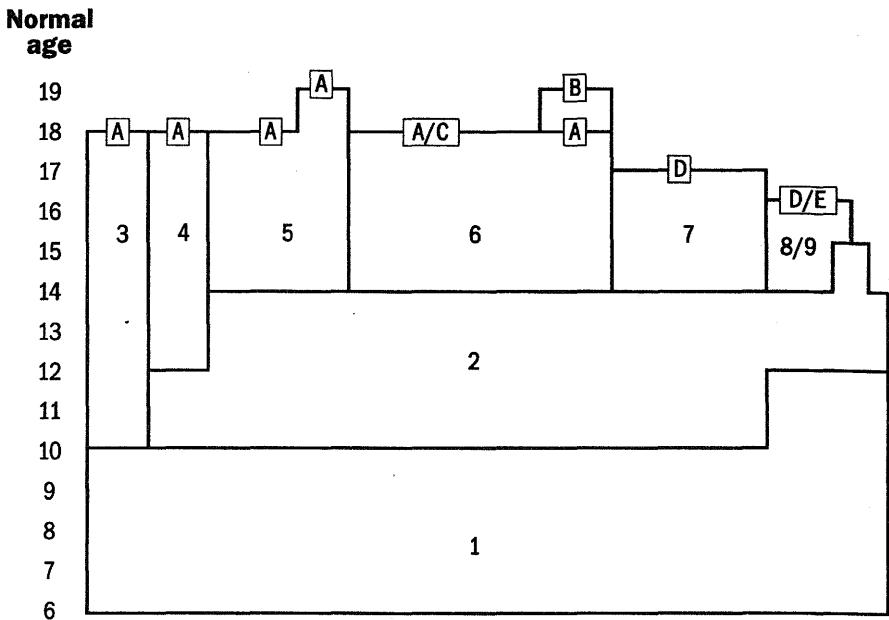
In this text we shall generally use the definition by the relevant age group: secondary education will mean education of the 10–18 age group. This means that the higher grades of the eight years general (basic) school which is, in fact, the comprehensive first cycle of secondary education, will also be included into the category. This makes comparison easier with the majority of countries in which schools enrolling the 11–14 age group are defined as secondary institutions.

The enlargement of the scope of analysis to the higher grade classes of the basic school, that is the eight years General School is justified also by the fact that the structure of the system is actually in a state of change. Since 1990 secondary schools have been allowed to set up lower classes. As a consequence a growing number of pupils enters them without going through the last grades of the eight year basic school. An other tendency of change that contributes to the

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uncertainty of the borderline between the primary and secondary level is that some basic schools are setting up ninth or even tenth grade classes. These classes offer education mainly for those pupils who cannot find a place in the traditional secondary sector. A third tendency makes it more difficult the definition of the borderline between secondary and higher education: an increasing number of secondary schools open classes beyond the maturity level for the 19–21 age group. The place of this post-secondary sector is still uncertain.

Figure 1
The structure of the Hungarian education system



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| 1 Lower grades of the General School (classroom teaching) | A. Maturity examination |
| 2 Upper grades of the General School (subject teaching) | B. Technician qualification |
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| 4 Six years extended general secondary school | D. Secondary vocational (skilled worker) qualification |
| 5 Four years (regular) general secondary school (bilingual schools with "0" grades included) | E. Lower level vocational qualification |
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The horizontal delimitation of secondary education is not much easier than the vertical one. During the last decades a large sector of adult education has been developed. At present the majority of those enrolled into this sector are young persons who have not accomplished their basic or secondary education or participate in different training forms serving manpower

market adaptation. During the past few years the number of people participating in short retraining courses funded by the manpower administration doubled each year. The majority of the participants are young people entering the labor market.

The structure of the system

Since the structure of the system is, both vertically and horizontally, in a state of transition its graphic presentation is not simple. Not only basic general education is being extended but its internal pedagogical cycles are also changing their length. There is an increasing number of schools which provide education at different levels, e.g. basic schools having secondary classes or secondary schools having primary classes. New schools types are emerging which enroll pupils at an age that hitherto was not considered as an age of choice (vertical changes), and the enrollment ratio from a given age group into different school types (horizontal changes) is also rapidly shifting. The 1993 Education Act has extended the time of general basic education from 8 to 10 years and changes the earliest entry age to specialized vocational training: this can be started, in the future, only after the completion of the tenth year of basic schooling. Figure 1 presents the system as it has developed from the changes of the past few years.

The understanding of the structure of the system can be helped by data presenting the participation of different age cohorts in given school types. As Table 1 shows participation rate starts dropping after the age of 16 (the end of school compulsion) and it becomes very low after the age of 17 (the normal termination age of the three years vocational school).

Table 1

The number of pupils/students enrolled in different types of schools according the age cohorts, 1993/94.

Age	General School (1-8)	Spec. School (1-8)	Vocational schools (1-3)	Gen. and Techn. Secondary schools (0-5)	Adult and higher education	All	% of the age cohort
5	4 463	551	-	-	-	5 014	
6	109 334	1 610	-	-	-	110 944	
7	122 044	2 566	-	-	-	124 610	
8	119 578	3 540	-	-	-	123 118	
9	118 955	3 650	-	-	-	122 605	
10	119 923	3 954	-	2 669	-	126 546	
11	126 157	4 010	-	1 966	-	132 133	
12	102 025	4 388	-	4 780	-	111 193	
13	138 549	4 509	-	2 866	-	145 924	98.9
14	26 670	4 471	42 020	73 502	-	146 663	94.3
15	8 284	3 805	60 443	79 962	8 400	154 307	93.3
16	1 153	2 348	63 442	76 859	8 400	152 202	87.4
17	-	1 053	21 317	75 626	15 031	113 027	62.4
18	-	323	9 487	21 196	27 669	58 634	30.3
19	-	76	7 267	3 125	32 669	43 137	25.7
20	-	36	393	-	27 995	28 424	18.9

Source: Educational and demographic statistics

The social context of education

Historically the Hungarian system of secondary education has developed under German-Austrian influences. The dominant form of secondary schooling, the Gimnázium, was created in 1849 by a decree of the Austrian authorities immediately after the defeat of the 1848–49 liberation war. The development of the technical and vocational (apprentice) education was in a great part influenced by the German who played an important role in the industrial development of the country.

Preceding the Second World War Hungary had an educational system based on a short (four year) elementary school followed by three main types of schools: (1) the long (eight years) Gimnázium, (2) a shorter (four year) modern school which opened the way mainly clerical professions and also to higher secondary schools and (3) the terminal classes of the elementary school. This model was radically altered after the Second World War (a more detailed presentation of this will be given in the section on structural development).

The role and meaning of secondary schooling has been deeply transformed during the last few decades. After the Second World War it was seen by the ruling political forces as an influential tool to transform the mind and the composition of society and it was perceived by different social groups as the most device of social and economic ascent. Similarly to other European countries the post-war development of the system of secondary education was characterized by quantitative expansion resulting in the generalization of lower level secondary education and in a qualitative transformation that approached technical and general education and increased the unity of the system.

Despite the rise of its importance, the perception of schooling has remained ambiguous in Hungarian society. The gradual liberalization of economic activities and the massive participation in the so called "second economy" opened other ways of social ascension than schooling as early as in the sixties. The relatively low level of salaries of professions requiring high level education under state-socialism considerably lowered the prestige of schooling. According to public opinion surveys the majority of Hungarian people think it is possible to succeed in life without being educated. Different surveys, however, show that during the last five years the importance of schooling significantly increased: people with lower level education are much more threatened by unemployment and schooling has a growing impact on earnings. Despite the process of expansion the education level of Hungarian society remained relatively low: in 1990 (year of the last census) only 27.5% of the population older than 15 had secondary or higher level qualification. In the same year 24.8% of the active population had secondary and 12.3% higher level qualification.

Schooling have been and is influenced to a great extent by the particularly uneven demographic conditions characterizing Hungary. Due to voluntaristic state interventions two large demographic waves emerged during the last decades, making the planning of teacher and building supplies extremely difficult. At the beginning of the seventies, when the first demographic wave – generated by policy measures in the early fifties – reached the fecundity age, a series of policy measures increased again the birth rate. As a consequence, the number of birth per one thousand inhabitants grew from 14.7 in 1972 to 18.4 in 1975. The particularly numerous generations born between 1974 and 1977 reached the (upper) secondary level in the middle of the eighties and has entered the labor market since the beginning of the nineties in a period of economic recession.

Similarly to other Central and Eastern European countries secondary education was directly and heavily influenced by the economic crisis related to the collapse of the economic

relations between COMECON countries. This crisis resulted in the steep decrease of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the soaring deficit of the state budget and the rise of unemployment. The GDP in 1993 was only 80% of that of 1989 and its decrease stopped only in 1994. While unemployment was practically unknown before 1989 in 1995 it was more than 10% of the active population and – what is even more serious – the number of the active population in 1994 was 27% less than in 1989. The yearly deficit of the state budget at the beginning of 1995 was expected more than 7% of the GDP. To sum up: during the period following the change of the political regime in 1990 the economic context of secondary education was characterized by demographic decline accompanied by economic recession and, consequently, serious cuts in public expenditure.

The political context of secondary education underwent naturally also dramatic changes following the political transformation in 1990. Although after five years of change and turmoil the first signs of stabilization make their appearance we still have to speak about a period of transition and, consequently, there are still many unanswered questions related to the future political and economic environment of education.

In Hungary the process of political transformation from state-socialism to democracy was rather slow and gradual and it was characterized by relative stability. The process was prepared by a rather long reform period, going back to the sixties. An Education Act in 1985 radically deregulated the system, restricting external control over schools and enlarging school level professional autonomy. In the atmosphere created by the soviet perestroika the inner political development was accelerated in the late 80s. Formal negotiations on the change of political regime between the new political parties and the government started in 1989. The first free elections were held in April 1990: they led to the emergence of six major parliamentary parties which, six years after the first elections, are still those having parliamentary seats. Due to the relatively long transitional period the new political parties had time to formulate their basic ideas on education. This process was influenced at a great extent by different groups of educational experts giving advise to the new political formations.

The first free elections were won by the national conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), which formed a coalition government together with the two other conservative Christian and national parties, the Independent Smallholders Party (FKgP) and the Christian Democratic Party (KDNP). This coalition government remained in office till the second parliamentary elections in 1994. In these elections the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) won 54% of parliamentary seats and formed a coalition government with the liberal Federation of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). The sixth parliamentary party is the conservative liberal Federation of Young Democrats (FIDESZ) which has been in opposition since 1990.

One of the first legislative actions of the new parliament in 1990 gave self governing power to local authorities, which became the owners of the earlier state schools. These measures, reinforcing already existing tendencies, created a tripolar field in which the schools, the local authorities and the central government have obtained more or less balanced power. As a consequence local elections are also strongly determining the political context of education. The first local elections held in September 1990 led to liberal control in major cities and to the dominance of independents (often former socialist) in villages. The second local elections, in December 1994, have led to a relative balance of power between the government parties and the opposition.

The power of the parliament and local self-governments is at a certain degree counterbalanced by that of the constitutional court. Half of the members of this body were elected before the first free elections what means that it represents a certain continuity. Since the

elections the constitutional court has abolished several laws or lower rules, for example the decree issued in 1986 endowing teacher staffs with a veto right against the appointment of the school principals. Besides the political parties the political scene is peopled by a great number of professional organizations, pressure groups, associations and unions which are able to mobilize their membership for the defense of different interests. Most of them were born during the transitional period but the largest teacher union represents continuity.

The structural evolution of the system

Although the time scope of this analysis is only the last two decades a short detour to the period prior to 1970 cannot be avoided. The main events of this period must be evoked because most of the present structural tensions and contradictions of the system can be traced back to earlier changes and developments.

Expansion and structural tensions: earlier developments

The main lines of the currently dominant "8 plus" structure, as earlier mentioned, has been drawn the first post-war governments when the eight years general school was defined as the only legal school form for compulsory education. In fact, this was a comprehensive reform expanding the unified part of schooling from four to eight years and merging all school types that had earlier received pupils after the fourth grade. For those leaving the eight year general school three ways were open for further studies: (a) the four year academic school leading to the maturity examination, (b) the different technical secondary schools leading to both maturity and professional certificate and (c) the shorter part-time vocational (apprentice) schools.

During the fifties and the sixties the system underwent two greater expansion periods. The first one was linked with the forced industrialization of the fifties when schools became the main manpower supply of the expanding industrial sector. The second one was pushed by the arrival of a baby boom generation to the secondary sector in the middle of the sixties. The expansion periods were accompanied by drastic reorganizations that were supposed to serve the adaptation of the system to the new conditions. Enrollment and supply were planned in the framework of the five year national economic plans: long-term manpower planning was started at the beginning of the sixties but its first results appeared only at the end of the decade.

In fact, the main structural contradictions of the present system go back to the early sixties. In 1961 the parliament adopted an Education Act 1961 that remained in force – with minor amendments – till 1985. This act rose the compulsory school age from 14 to 16 without affecting the "8 plus" structure. The fact that the new compulsory age was disjoined of the completion of the basic school (General School) resulted in series of structural tensions and generated demands for structural reform. Although the issue of structural reform was one of the top items on the education policy agenda during almost two decades the reform was repeatedly postponed and finally – by the middle of the eighties – definitely dropped.

The main reason of the reform being rejected is probably that the consensus on its principles could have never been reached between two opposing ideas: the first one was linked with an "old dream", the ideal of rising the compulsory age up to the age of 18 and making so the maturity oriented secondary schooling general. The second idea was that of adapting the system to the existing compulsory age by dividing the four year secondary schools into two cycles and opening an exit at the age of 16 that is at the end of the first cycle. As often formulated by the advocates of the first idea, the latter solution would have meant the definite

end of the traditional academic school, the "Gimnázium" as a school type. Whereas the defenders of the second idea said either that the dream of general (upper) secondary schooling could not be realized within reasonable time or that this was simply an argument of those interested in maintaining a selective elite sector.

The expansion launched by the 1961 Reform Act resulted in a rapid growth of the general (Gimnázium) sector. It was assumed that the apprenticeship system would expire in the near future and all 14 old pupils would enter either the Gimnázium or the new technical secondary school, the "Szakközépiskola". This later was supposed to offer both general academic education and specialized training for skilled worker vocations (the training of technicians was to be pushed up to the higher education sector). The contradiction between the manpower needs of industry and the academic output of the system was to be solved by "polytechnization": new technical subjects were introduced into the Gimnázium's curriculum and one day of the school week had to be devoted to manual work in factories.

In 1965, when the baby boom of the early fifties reached secondary education the 1961 reform was stopped and the structure of the pre-reform period were restored. The bulk of the demographic wave was directed to the re-evaluated vocational training (apprenticeship) system; the traditional elite character of the Gimnázium was restored with its intake pushed down under 20 percent and the training of technicians was defined as the task of secondary technical schools. The 1965 changes reinforced the specialized vocational sector. By the end of the decade this sector became one of the most important parts of the system: between 1960 and 1970 its enrollment has doubled. By 1970 it enrolled 45% of pupils leaving the eight year basic school and 65% of those entering the secondary sector. In 1969 a Law on Vocational Education detached the system from industry and the three year vocational schools, that earlier were not considered as secondary schools, became recognized institutions of formal secondary education.

At the beginning of the seventies, when the demographic wave left the secondary level, the question of the vertical and horizontal structure was raised again. After a rather long period of public debates the ruling communist party issued a major educational policy resolution in 1972. Although the need for structural changes was not denied, instead of a structural reform a curricular one was proposed. It was stated that by the end of the decade new modernized curricula had to be introduced at all educational levels and all school types. The structural questions were relegated from the policy scene to that of research: the study of structural problems received considerable financial and institutional support and new reform proposals based on research were to be elaborated by the end of the decade.

The 1972 decision stabilized the existing 8 plus 4(3) system and, on the short term, put an end to the ideas of expanding further general basic education. The eight year basic school and the three year vocational school were designated as priority areas for development. This actually meant that – contrary to some Central and Eastern European countries – the 14 plus selection point was not touched and the Gimnázium as a more or less traditional academic school with the main function of preparing pupils for higher studies was maintained. Rather ironically the measure keeping this structural arrangement based on relatively early carrier choice and early selection for preparation for higher education was taken in a political climate determined by egalitarian and expansionist ideas.

By the end of the seventies a series of reform proposals were elaborated: most of them suggesting the expansion of general education and the postponement of the selection point. A typical proposal, formulated already at the end of the sixties, was the introduction of a ten year general basic school (partly based on the GDR model). This reform proposal was backed

first of all by the central manpower planners, but it was opposed by several interest groups, specially by the representatives of the universities and those of the secondary schools preparing for higher education studies. The decision, again in the form of a party resolution, was taken at the beginning of the eighties. The proposals for structural reform were rejected mainly because of external political and economic reasons. The lack of resources and growing indebtedness of the country, the already crumbling legitimacy of the political regime and the experiences of the poorly managed curriculum reform after 1978 were the main reasons of rejecting the idea of any major developmental reform.

The changes of the past decade

In 1984 the parliament adopted an overall public education development plan. According to this plan two major changes affecting the structure of the system were proposed: horizontally the increase of the enrollment into the non vocational sector of secondary education; and vertically the regrouping of the curricula of the two first forms (receiving the 14–16 age group) and the final years (enrolling the 17–18 age group) of the different technical secondary institutions. The idea was that the two first years should take a more general character while the final years should be more specialized with a greater direct responsibility taken by enterprises. It was assumed that by this structural development the manpower needs of the economy – that were supposed to change rapidly in the future – could be conveyed more directly to the schools without being channeled through the rigid mechanisms of central planning.

Despite some common elements (the abandonment of selection and specialization before the age of 16) this idea – based on a strategy of local level adaptation allowing divergence instead of a strategy of macro level reform requiring unity – was totally different of the idea of the ten year basic school, backed earlier by the manpower planners and by those oriented by the soviet or the GDR model. Although during the eighties the state did not initiate any major structural changes, some smaller centrally introduced modifications, on the one hand, and the large number of locally initiated changes, on the other hand, led to a process of changes which resulted in an unprecedented structural diversity (the result of these changes was presented in Figure 1).

The first signs of structural diversity appeared in the second half of the seventies in the field of secondary technical education: experiments aiming at reducing the differences between the first two grades of different types of secondary schools were started. Many secondary technical schools regrouped their program so that they offer general education in the first two grades and specialized training in the second two ones. After the second year they sometimes opened special vocational training tracks for lower achievers.

The vertical structure of the system was further relaxed by the introduction of new school types with fifth grades (professional secondary schools preparing for secondary level technician qualification) and “0” grades (bilingual secondary schools) in the second half of the eighties. Another source of change was a provision of the 1985 Education Act which allowed schools to apply so called “particular solutions” including secondary schools to open lower (basic school) classes (applying the curricula of the eight years basic school).

However, the process leading to structural diversity was given the greatest impetus by the 1990 amendment of the 1985 Education Act which authorized the creation of six and eight year Gimnáziums. In September 1993 there were 229 Gimnázium classes receiving 10 year old pupils in 86 institutions and 179 classes receiving 12 years old pupils in 68 schools. By

1994 the number of Gimnáziums having eight years classes (enrolling 10 year old pupils) increased to 126 while the number of six years institutions (enrolling 12 year old pupils) rose to 126. This means that the majority of Gimnáziums (214 out of 278) have classes that enroll pupils below 14. The number of schools opening 6 years classes increases faster than those opening 8 year classes, which is in accordance with the government policy.

Another important change in the vertical structure of the system was brought about by those eight years basic schools which set up higher (ninth or tenth) classes. In most cases these classes receive pupils who were not admitted into a secondary school and they apply special vocation oriented curricula but sometimes they are Gimnázium classes.

The question of how to shape the vertical structure is one of those questions which actually divide the education policy scene. In fact, three typical opinions can be observed: (1) an overall structural reform should be started in order to legitimize the new developments and to introduce a new vertical structure based on them – a rather rare view; (2) all structural changes should be stopped because they disintegrate the system and lead to growing social inequalities; (3) gradual structural changes should be allowed with fixed rules for local transformations leading to a new structure in a longer period. Some proposals for change are in favor of a three levels (elementary, lower secondary, higher secondary) system replacing the present two levels (primary, secondary) system, although there are important political factors that refuse the three levels pattern, and are in favor of keeping the 8 plus 4 system or changing it into a highly selective 4 plus model. Public opinion polls show that the society is strongly divided as far as the desired vertical structure of the education system is concerned.

Although no clear structural policy has yet been adopted at the time of the writing of this report (December 1995) the latest legislative actions have defined certain directions for further development. The most important is undoubtedly the redefinition of the entry age into specialized vocational training. According to the 1993 laws on public education and vocational training pupils can enter specialized vocational training only at 16 (as opposed to the present entry age at 14). However, the implementation of this provision has been postponed to 1998. The introduction of the new National Core Curriculum (NCC) may also have a determining impact on structural development. This document defines a common core curriculum for the 6–16 age groups, that is for the first 10 years of schooling. It is expected that the content of teaching in last two grades of secondary education will be regulated by the requirements of the maturity examination.

The development of the vertical structure of the system is not independent of changes in the horizontal structure. Horizontally the system is also changing. The share of vocational schools in the enrollment of pupils completing the eight year basic school dropped from 47.5% in 1988 to 40.5 in 1994 while, in the same period the share of maturity oriented (full) secondary schools increased from 47.5% to 57% (see Table 2). It is important to stress that these changes have occurred without a coherent national reform policy: they are, in fact, the result of local or school level and parental decisions.

The development of the structure of the system may be directly influenced by the government policy aiming at encouraging the expansion of maturity oriented secondary education. According to public policy declarations the goal is to keep 80–85% of the young generation in tracks that are open towards the maturity examination up to the tenth grade of schooling. Regarding the forecasted demographic decline of the next decade this would require the enrollment of 85–90% of pupils leaving the eight years basic schools in classes that provide education opening a way towards the maturity examination.

Table 2
The distribution of enrollment between different tracks of secondary education

Year	Number of pupils leaving basic schools	Gen. second. schools %	Techn. second. schools %	Vocat. sec. schools %	Other short voc. schools %	Special remedial courses %	All %
1988/89	149 640	20.1	27.4	44.5	3.0	-	95.0
1989/90	170 891	20.4	27.0	42.7	3.2	-	93.3
1990/91	164 616	2.1	27.5	42.0	2.9	-	93.4
1991/92	158 912	21.6	28.9	39.2	2.2	-	91.9
1992/93	151 295	23.3	30.1	36.6	1.8	3.9	95.7
1993/94	144 203	24.2	31.8	35.5	1.4	4.5	97.5
1994/95	136 900	25.7	32.6	35.2		5.3	98.8

Source: Educational statistics

The period of state-socialism was characterized by massive adult education provided by institutions belonging to the formal system. Following the change of the political regime this form of education was cut back but recently enrollment is again increasing (see Table 3). Adult education is a sector which is particularly exposed to demographic, economic and institutional fluctuations.

Table 3
Enrollment at the adult courses of general and technical secondary schools between 1980 and 1993

Academic year	General secondary schools	Technical secondary schools			All	All secondary schools
		Industry	Agri-culture	Services		
1980/81	35 218	55 395	4 839	34 880	95 114	130 332
1985/86	20 396	38 360	2 623	23 225	64 208	84 604
1990/91	18 820	27 122	1 206	21 014	49 342	68 162
1991/92	19 912	24 948	628	20 716	46 292	66 204
1992/93	21 509	27 993	742	19 652	48 387	69 896
1993/94	22 588	32 249	794	20 704	53 747	76 335

Source: Educational statistics

The system may be seriously modified by the rapid development of non-formal education, especially labor market oriented training forms. At present, the majority of labor market oriented training is financed and organized by the labor administration and economic organizations. Some experts foresee their future integration with the formal school system but this is, in fact, not probably. Their existence is, however, a challenge for the formal system. Another recent development which may have a serious structural impact is the emergence of different forms of post-secondary education provided by various agencies (private training firms, higher education institution and also secondary schools). The place of this new sector and its linkages with school and higher education are subject of many recent educational debates.

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