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Overcoming the Academic Failure of Students as a Priority of Educational Policy: The Case of Russia

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Abstract

Introduction. One of the priorities of the modern educational policy of Russia is to ensure the academic success of young students – schoolchildren and university students. However, the realization of this goal is in conflict with other objectives of educational policy and factors in the development of Russian higher education, including initiatives in the field of school education. Traditionally, academic failure is interpreted as an individual's phenomenon related to the inefficiency of pedagogical approaches and technologies. However, in fact, the social scale and context of the problem make it necessary to consider it as an institutional phenomenon, the prerequisites of which are formed at the level of pre-university education. The purpose of the article is to interpret the problem of academic failure of students in the context of educational policy.

Materials and Methods. The theoretical basis for studying the relationship between educational policy and academic failure of young students is the theory of inequality in education and the concept of the policy of “choosing winners”. The empirical basis of the article is the results of a study carried out using the following methods: analysis of documents (scientific publications, regulatory documents, statistical and monitoring research data), semi-formalized expert interviews with representatives of educational organizations in Yekaterinburg and the Sverdlovsk Region ($n = 30$ people).

Results. Government initiatives aimed at reducing inequality in education are shown as an institutional context for overcoming academic failure of young students, covering pre-university education. The contradictions of such state initiatives in Russian education as the Unified State Examination, a project to support schools with low learning outcomes and/or schools operating in difficult social conditions, and the Academic Olympics movement are revealed. It is proved that the problems of implementing institutional initiatives in school education serve as prerequisites for the formation of academic failure of university students.

Discussion and Conclusion. The practical significance of the research results is seen in the justification of the directions for improving government initiatives and projects to support students to overcome their academic failure. Further analysis of the latent contradictions of the Russian education system in the context of the introduction of institutional measures to overcome the academic failure of schoolchildren and university students seems promising.

Keywords: national educational policy, overcoming academic failure, overcoming of inequality in education, “picking winners” policy, higher education, resilient schools, Unified State Examination, Russian Academic Olympics, students, schoolchildren, teachers

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Преодоление академической неуспешности учащихся как приоритет образовательной политики: кейс России

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Аннотация

Введение. Одним из приоритетов современной образовательной политики Российской Федерации является обеспечение академической успешности учащейся молодежи – школьников и студентов. Однако его реализация входит в противоречие с другими задачами образовательной политики и факторами развития российского высшего образования, включая инициативы в области школьного образования. Традиционно академическая неуспешность интерпретируется как индивидуальное явление, обусловленное неэффективностью педагогических подходов и технологий, но социальный масштаб и контекст проблемы вызывают необходимость рассматривать ее как институциональный феномен, предпосылки которого формируются еще на уровне довузовского образования. Цель исследования – интерпретировать проблемы академической неуспешности учащейся молодежи в контексте образовательной политики.

Материалы и методы. Теоретической основой изучения взаимосвязи образовательной политики и академической неуспешности студентов выступает теория неравенства в образовании и концепция политики «выбора победителей». Эмпирическую основу статьи составляют анализ документов (научных публикаций, нормативных документов, данные статистических и мониторинговых исследований), полуформализованное экспертное интервью с представителями образовательных организаций г. Екатеринбурга и Свердловской области ($n = 30$ чел.).

Результаты исследования. Представлены государственные инициативы, направленные на снижение неравенства в образовании, институциональный контекст преодоления академической неуспешности учащейся молодежи, охватывающий довузовское образование. Раскрыты противоречия таких государственных инициатив в российском образовании, как Единый государственный экзамен, проект поддержки школ с низкими результатами обучения и/или школ, функционирующих в сложных социальных условиях, и олимпиадное движение. Обосновано, что проблемы реализации институциональных инициатив в школьном образовании служат предпосылками формирования академической неуспешности студентов.

Обсуждение и заключение. Практическая значимость исследования заключается в обосновании направлений совершенствования государственных инициатив и проектов поддержки учащейся молодежи для преодоления ее академической неуспешности. Перспективным считается дальнейший анализ латентных противоречий системы российского образования в контексте внедрения институциональных мер преодоления академической неуспешности школьников и студентов.

Ключевые слова: государственная образовательная политика, преодоление академической неуспешности, преодоление неравенства в образовании, политика “выбора победителей”, высшее образование, резильентные школы, Единый государственный экзамен, Всероссийская олимпиада школьников, студенты, школьники, учителя

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Introduction

One of the ways to achieve a decent quality of higher education is to overcome academic failure among university students. Academic success provides graduates with unique human capital¹ and high salaries [1]. It has a positive impact on countries' social, economic, and innovation development [2; 3], as well as being a factor in the attractiveness and competitiveness of national higher education systems [4]. Thus, overcoming academic failure is not only an objective of individual students, teachers, and universities, but also a priority in national higher education policy.

However, academic failure is not sufficiently addressed in the context of national educational policy. It is often considered only at individual/personal [5] and organizational levels [6; 7]. Local solutions with fragmented effects are developed from the same perspective.

We believe that the study of this issue cannot be limited only to the university space and the actors involved (teachers, psychologists, university managers, tutors, parents). Based on the results of previous studies, we suggest expanding the research framework to an institutional scale. This will make it possible to understand how the quality and priorities of the state's general policy in the field of education affect academic success/failure. This research focus allows us to consider how young students' academic failure arises and intensifies or, on the contrary, is overcome when their human capital transfers from school to university.

The issue of academic failure has been studied by researchers and policymakers in many countries from different angles and with varying degrees of relevance [8; 9]. It is sometimes viewed in the context of academic success/failure in highly selective or non-selective universities [10; 11]. Some researchers associate it with student dropout and engagement [12; 13]. In some cases, researchers have based their studies on Bourdieu's thinking, focusing on the influence on students' academic success of their social class's social and symbolic capital [14; 15].

¹ Case J.M., Marshall D., McKenna S., Mogashana D. Going to University: The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans. Cape Town: African Minds; 2018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.47622/9781928331698>

In this article, the research question is the interpretation of academic failure in the context of educational policy. We test the hypothesis of whether overcoming students' academic failure is indeed a priority for Russian educational policy and, if so, which tools are effective or ineffective. The purpose of the study is to consider the academic failure of students as a problem of educational policy in Russia.

Literature Review

Inequality theory as a framework for academic failure studies in the focus of educational policy. We base our first research perspective on the concept of educational inequality. Overcoming inequality in education is a priority of educational policies in many countries. Inequality and academic failure are interrelated: on the one hand, unequal educational opportunities and unequal access to quality education reduce students' chances of high academic achievements. On the other hand, differences in educational achievements are markers of status differentiation and prerequisites for discrimination against students in educational institutions. This is true for all levels of education, including school and higher education [16; 17]. Based on the effectiveness of institutional measures aimed at reducing inequality in education, we can predict the rate of young students' academic failure in a particular country.

Theories of inequality in education are in the mainstream of education research. Student class, gender, and ethnicity, as well as their place of residence and migratory status, are recognized as the main causes of inequality in education. Their influence on academic performance and educational choice has been proven by researchers. Thus, C. Buchmann argues that in many countries, girls are on average more academically successful than boys [18]. In the USA, UK, and most other countries, girls enter universities more often than boys². Girls get higher grades at school and are less

² DiPrete T., Buchmann C. Gender Disparities in Educational Attainment in the New Century: Trends, Causes and Consequences. In: Logan J.R. (eds) Diversity and Disparities: America Enters a New Century. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; 2013. Available at: <https://www.russellsage.org/publications/diversity-and-disparities> (accessed 19.07.2024).

likely to breach discipline. The results of national and international tests show that girls, on average, are noticeably ahead of boys in reading tests and, in most cases, outperform boys in math tests [19; 20].

Classical sociological studies have proven the existence of the primary and secondary effects of social origin on students' educational trajectories. P. Bourdieu and R. Boudon were the first to suggest that the reproduction of social inequality in education should be considered as two related processes³. M. Jackson analyzed the primary and secondary effects of educational transitions at different levels in several European countries and the United States⁴. H. Troiano and M. Elias found that class background still influences students' educational chances, as the choice of university and educational program seeks to minimize the family's risks and expenses [21]. At the same time, one family strategy is to choose schools and universities that match their social status [22].

All these identified trends are also manifested in Russian education⁵ [23]. They confirm the conclusions made earlier by T.P. Gerber and M. Hout on the impact of social background on unequal opportunities in education. Researchers believe that the transition to a market economy only intensified the reproduction of inequality in Russia. Accordingly, the authors argued that the influence of social class on educational opportunities in Russia is stronger than in European countries [24; 25].

³ Bourdieu P., Passeron J.C. La reproduction éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement. Paris: Editions de Minuit; 1970. Available at: https://monoskop.org/images/5/5a/Bourdieu_Pierre_Passeron_Jean_Claude_La_reproduction_1970.pdf (accessed 19.07.2024); Boudon R. Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality; Changing Prospects in Western Society. New York: Wiley; 1974.

⁴ Jackson M. Determined to Succeed? Performance vs Choice in Educational Attainment. Stanford: Stanford University Press; 2013. <https://doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9780804783026.001.0001>

⁵ Drobizheva L.M., Konstantinovskiy D.L., Mukharyamova L.M., Mukharyamov N.M. Russia: Ethnic Differentiation in Education in a Context of Debates on Cultural Diversity, Autonomy, Cultural Homogeneity and Centralization. In: The Palgrave Handbook of Race and Ethnic Inequalities in Education. London: Palgrave Macmillan; 2019. p. 885–930. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94724-2_21

The theory of effectively maintained inequality in education [26] has great explanatory potential for our study. It substantiates the fact that the increased accessibility of higher education leads to significant differences in the quality of educational programs at universities. Highly selective universities are considered to provide high-quality education and have successful students who have a good school background and achieve future success. The quality of education in non-selective (mass) universities is worse: they have more students who are poorly prepared for university studies.

At the same time, an important thesis of the theory of effectively maintained inequality is that students with a high socioeconomic status are more likely to enter highly selective universities. Their academic difficulties are compensated by their parents' investment in additional tuition [27–29]. Students with low socioeconomic status, even those with high academic achievements, are less likely to enroll in such universities [30].

Academic failure and the “picking winners” policy: a theoretical conceptualization. The concept of “picking winners” has become the basis of selective government policy in various areas – industry⁶ [31; 32], science⁷ [33; 34], and education [35]. According to this concept, policymakers (government agents) provide special support to selected beneficiaries – research or educational organizations, specific researchers – to enhance their global competitiveness.

This concept justifies the distribution of scarce resources among beneficiaries who can quickly bring a return on public

⁶ Ericson S. Picking Winners: Technology-Specific Policies Can Be Welfare Improving. Boulder: University of Colorado Boulder; 2020. Available at: https://www.colorado.edu/economics/sites/default/files/attached-files/20-03_-_ericson.pdf (accessed 18.06.2024).

⁷ Irvine J., Martin B.R. Foresight in Science: Picking the Winners. London, Dover, N.H.: F. Pinter; 1984; Huang Y.H., Lin T.B. Respect and Trust: A Case Study of the UK Higher Education Personnel System and Its Implications for the Recruitment of Academic Talent. In: Sung Y.T., Lin A.P., Chi M.C., Cheng M.H. (eds) The Personnel System for Talent Development in Higher Education. Learning Sciences for Higher Education. Singapore: Springer; 2024. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6278-1_5



investment. Their status of “winners”, leaders in the sphere, is the criteria for selecting beneficiaries. In Russia, in school education, these are highly selective schools and talented students. In higher education, these are universities, groups of academic staff, and students demonstrating outstanding achievements in education and science.

The selective policy of “picking winners” in Russian education has become possible due to the fact that most educational organizations are funded by the state. Most Russian universities are state-owned and funded from the federal budget. Few universities are funded by regional or city budgets.

The policy of “picking winners” gives rise to the “Matthew effect”, described by R. Merton⁸ and further developed in more recent education studies⁹. The effect is named after the biblical expression: “for unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath” (Matthew 25:29). The essence of the “Matthew effect” is the uneven distribution of benefits so that some social actors, already possessing them, continue to accumulate, while other subjects, initially deprived, are deprived even more and, therefore, have less chances for further success.

Merton’s concept and the concept of the “picking winners” policy is a theoretical framework for interpreting university students’ academic failure. This theoretical framework has been applied in education research to study academic underachievement of children with dyslexia or children with functional illiteracy from disadvantaged and lower social class backgrounds. However, these theories are rarely used in higher education research [36; 37]; to our knowledge, they have not been used to study student underachievement.

⁸ Merton R.K. The Matthew Effect in Science: The Reward and Communication Systems of Science Are Considered. *Science*. 1968;159(3810):56–63. Available at: <https://garfield.library.upenn.edu/merton/matthew1.pdf> (accessed 25.06.2024).

⁹ Kerckhoff A.C., Glennie E.J. The Matthew Effect in American Education. In: *Research Sociology of Education and Socialization*. London: JAI Press; 1999. p. 35–66; Bonitz M., Bruckner E., Scharnhorst A. Characteristics and Impact of the Matthew Effect for Countries. *Scientometrics*. 1997;40(3):407–422. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02459289>

Materials and Methods

This article’s conclusions are based on the data of an empirical study conducted by the authors. First, we used the method of document analysis to study the following scientific publications focusing on educational policy in Russia and other countries, on educational inequality and academic failure; the content of normative documents regulating relations in education in Russia and the documents on strategic planning for the development of Russian education (national projects, state programs).

Second, we analyzed data on Russian education from statistical and monitoring studies that characterize quantitative and qualitative parameters of student activities and those of educational organizations. Third, we used the results of a semi-formal expert interview ($n = 30$ people, 2020) with representatives of educational organizations of various types in Yekaterinburg and Sverdlovsk Region (schools, colleges, universities, private educational centers). One of the main criteria for the selection of experts was long hands-on experience (at least 10 years) of working with underachieving students (schoolchildren and university students). All respondents were informed about their participation in the study.

The last part of the study has certain limitations in extrapolating data to all Russian inefficient schools due to the use of a qualitative methodology, which provided for the consideration of specific cases of schools in one of the regions of Russia.

Results

State initiatives aimed at reducing inequality in education. In this part of the article, we discuss whether the measures designed by Russian policymakers to reduce educational inequality has led to overcoming educational underachievement. This approach is substantiated by a theoretical framework that establishes the correlation between inequality in education and academic failure. It is worth noting that that the educational policy instruments that we will analyze were developed by Russian policymakers based on international experience in solving educational inequality. However, they have national specifics and are implemented in specific social and economic conditions. It should

also be noted that we will consider the issue in the context of the transition from school to university education, since the basic causes of educational inequality and academic failure lie in school education and manifest themselves when students move from school to university.

The issue of inequality in education was first discussed by Russian researchers in the late 1990s in connection with the post-Soviet transformation of Russian society. Policymakers responded to this issue with several management initiatives (Table 1).

Of all the initiatives presented in table 1, we chose to analyze the Unified State Examination (USE) and the project aimed at supporting schools with poor learning outcomes and/or schools operating in adverse social conditions. In our opinion, examining these two tools will allow us to give the clearest answer to our hypothesis. The results of the initiatives proposed within the framework of the national projects “Education” and “Science and Universities” are difficult to assess now, because the cycle of implementation of these projects has not yet ended.

The impact of the Unified State Examination on reducing educational inequality and academic failure. The USE

was introduced in Russia in 2009 (it had been tested in certain regions from 2001 by analogy with the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in the USA, Abiturzeugnis in Germany, Mature in Austria, Poland, and the Czech Republic, Gakao in China, etc. In the context of the issue under study, we focus on two functions of the USE: overcoming inequality in education due to territorial differences and social background; improving the quality of enrollment (that is, providing universities with applicants who are well-prepared for university studies). Both functions were integrated in the objective of attracting successful, talented school-leavers from provincial schools to selective universities in the capital cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg).

The statistics show a very mixed picture of the results of the 10-year experience with the USE in terms of reducing both inequality and underachievement among students.

The first result of the introduction of the Unified State Examination: the educational mobility of school leavers from provincial regions increased, but the quality of school education is still higher in capital cities. Among first-year students studying at universities in capital cities, the proportion of those who came from provincial cities

Table 1. State initiatives aimed at reducing the level of inequality in Russian education

Type of initiative	Initiative Implementation Practices
1. Institutional transformation programs	1.1. Introduction of the Unified State Examination (2009). 1.2. Introduction of an additional year of study (transition to 11 years of study, (2007). 1.3. Adopting legislation that stipulates the geographical principle of enrolling children in schools (2012).
2. Programs aimed at equalizing educational chances of students with special educational rights	2.1. Quotas for university places for students with special educational rights (2012). 2.2. Organization of distance education for students from remote areas (2012). 2.3. Measures to develop inclusive education (2012).
3. School Equalization Programmes	3.1. Projects to support schools with low educational outcomes and/or schools operating in adverse social conditions (2018, 2020).
4. Federal project “Modern School” implemented within the framework of the National project “Education”	4.1. Provision of the opportunity for children to receive high-quality secondary education in conditions that match modern requirements, regardless of the place of residence of the child (2018–2024). 4.2. Organization of comprehensive psychological and pedagogical support for participants in educational relations (2018–2024).
5. Federal projects “Cadres” and “Integration” implemented within the framework of the National project “Science and Universities”	5.1. Provision of budget places in universities for at least 50% of school graduates in all regions of the Russian Federation (2018–2024). 5.2. Organization of free of charge education for university students in additional professional programs, obtaining additional qualifications for students on a free of charge basis (2018–2024).

Source: Compiled by the authors.



increased from 30% to 65% on average compared to the early 2000s, when 70% of first-year students were natives of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and the adjacent areas. However, these indicators do not directly prove an increase in the level of educational success of school leavers from provincial regions, since universities in the capitals (Moscow and St. Petersburg) received additional state-funded places, which were filled by the best school leavers from other regions. An indirect indicator that school leavers in capital cities are more competitive than those in other regions is the results of the rating of the 100 best schools in Russia, compiled by the Expert RA agency since 2015 and based on the success of school leavers entering leading (selective) universities. Ranking data from 2015 to 2022 indicate that schools in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and the Moscow and Leningrad Regions, dominate. In 2019, there were 54% of such schools, and only in 2022 did their number decrease slightly to 48%.

When assessing the achievement of the first objective – reducing inequality – we rely on the findings of researchers who have been monitoring this problem since the late 1990s [38]. The conclusions, unfortunately, are as follows:

- the USE contributes to the reproduction of the existing forms of social inequality and the emergence of new ones while also restricting access to higher education depending on geography, which differs in quality and future economic benefits in the labor market;
- educational success has little effect on the chances of children from low-status

families to enter prestigious universities: their families' low cultural and economic capital is an obvious barrier.

The second result of the introduction of the USE: a paradoxical combination of a trend towards improving the quality of the USE and university admission quality and a trend towards a decline in the level of readiness for university studies. The analysis of data collected through Monitoring the Quality of Admissions to Russian Universities for 2019–2021 shows a slight decrease in the proportion of universities that enroll school graduates with low USE scores and an increase in the proportion of universities that enroll applicants with average and high USE scores (Table 2).

However, the results of our sociological research have shown that an increase in USE scores does not mean an increase in readiness for university studies. To substantiate this claim, we will cite fragments of interviews with faculty members from Russian universities, which reflect typical evaluations of the current situation. The informants critically evaluate the USE as a tool for adequate assessment of not only the general readiness of school leavers for university, but even the assessment of their knowledge system: “In relation to the USE and success, I can say that among students in our program, there were applicants with the highest USE scores. They really have subject knowledge and skills. But their personal qualities are not well-developed: they are able to learn, but lack motivation. I understand that schoolchildren know how to master the rules of the game. Does the USE assess all knowledge? It does not

Table 2. Dynamics of the quality of admission to Russian universities with a total enrollment of 300+ people

Average USE score	2012	2019		2020		2021	
	Proportion of universities, %	Proportion of universities, %	Proportion of students enrolled, %	Proportion of universities, %	Proportion of students enrolled, %	Proportion of universities, %	Proportion of students enrolled, %
Under 60	24.8	20.3	12.3	16.9	10.5	17.8	10.1
60–70	42.5	57.4	54.6	52.9	46.6	54.5	49.5
Over 70	32.7	22.3	33.1	30.2	42.9	27.7	40.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: For 2013–2018, there are no reliable data in the public domain; 2012 was taken as a reference year, since the data for this year were available in full.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on databases monitoring the quality of admission to universities [Quality of Admission to Russian Universities: 2021] [Electronic resource]. In: Website of the HSE University. Available at: <https://www.hse.ru/ege2021/> (accessed 19.07.2024).



assess communication skills. We can't assess motivation through the USE, either" (female, 38 years old, associate professor, head of a bachelor's degree educational program, teaching experience – 10 years) (Hereinafter, the stylistics and grammar of the respondents' answers have been preserved. – *Ed.*).

As we can see, Russian policymakers have developed a tool that measures some subject knowledge. This is its major difference from European or American exams, which, in addition to subject knowledge, measure abilities, creative potential, and motivation for learning. It is no coincidence that in foreign assessment systems, tests are combined with submitting a portfolio, and oral interviews, all of which test the applicants' psychological qualities and abilities. Such sophisticated assessment tools are mandatory in highly selective universities. In Russian universities, only some prestigious universities are allowed to use this approach, but even they carry out additional tests within specific areas of knowledge.

The interviews conducted revealed another dysfunction of the USE as an institutional instrument. It manifests itself in the so-called coaching of schoolchildren for examination tests. This is evidenced by an excerpt from an interview: "It is difficult to say how success at school and success at university are connected. Applicants are enrolled according to their USE scores, and success is not necessarily determined by the scores. They get coached for the exam, and it's not always the smartest students that get the highest scores. If a creative person has applied a non-standard way of solving a problem or presenting their ideas, they may not get the highest score" (female, 42 years old, associate professor, teaching experience – 22 years).

The introduction of the USE in Russian education led to the emergence of a market of tutors who prepare students exclusively for the USE. According to a survey by Rambler&Co and SberUslugi, 49% of Russians with schoolchildren use the services of private tutors (almost 1 million people took part in the study), with 35% doing so on a regular basis. The volume of investment in tutoring naturally increases as children grow. In 2021, parents of

children in grades 7–8 spent an average of 2,800 rubles per week, those with children in grade 9 – 3,000 rubles, and those with children in grades 10–11 – 3,500 rubles.

Thus, the final school year, together with private tutoring, is not a year of full-value education, but a year of coaching for the Unified State Examination. Existing creative abilities, flexibility of thinking, interest in knowledge, and motivation for learning are destroyed as a result of "dumb drills". This situation is reflected in the following interview fragment: "University students need fundamental background training. We used to have excellent system of preparing schoolchildren for higher education. To get the most out of university education, one needed to prepare while still at school. Now we often have applicants who do not know the laws of mechanics, trigonometric functions. When I ask them what they were taught in school, they say that they were not taught, but coached to answer the questions in the Unified State Examination correctly" (male, 57 years old, professor, director of institute, teaching experience – 34 years).

Effectiveness of state support for schools at risk in reducing educational inequality and academic failure. In this section of the article, we will consider another institutional initiative of Russian policymakers – projects to support schools with low educational outcomes and/or schools operating in adverse social conditions.

Previously, schools where most students were academically unsuccessful were subject to institutional stigmatization. In some cases, even the municipal districts where such "unsuccessful" schools were concentrated could be subject to stigmatization. Such districts include the outskirts of large cities, settlements of blue-collar workers, and remote rural areas with low economic potential, poor infrastructure, and limited cultural and educational resources. Schools in such areas teach a complex student body, with a large proportion of children from single-parent, low-income families with a low level of education, migrant families, and addicts.

The main objective for teachers in such schools is to get their students through at least 9 grades, and if there are talented children among them, to help them



successfully complete 11 grades, although only a few of them enter universities. Here is an excerpt from an interview with a teacher from a school like this: “When I listen to education officials with their rhetoric of achievements, I really want to shout: “Yes, you haven’t worked at a school in Vtorchik¹⁰! Work here for at least a year, and you will understand what it is like. Strong teachers don’t stay here. More or less prosperous families move to other districts, it’s like a stigma” (female, 52 years old, school teacher, teaching experience – 30 years).

Many of the grounds for social stigmatization at school, which manifests itself as described above, are generated by the institutional context of Russian education. The current educational policy in Russia takes into account the burning issue of the increase in the number of “inefficient” schools. To address this issue, projects were initiated to identify such schools and develop programs to help them. In 2018, the government devised the “Modern School” federal project, focused on assisting schools operating in adverse social conditions and schools with low learning outcomes. In 2020, another project was launched – the “500+ project”. It also aims to improve the quality of education by providing support for schools with low educational outcomes (LEO) operating in adverse socio-economic conditions, as well as targeted support for students with learning difficulties.

The social mission of these projects was to overcome inequality in education and improve the quality of the human capital of young people entering universities. However, we can see that the majority of graduates of “inefficient” schools cannot overcome their academic failure. The exception is resilient schools, that is, schools that, due to special state support based on the School Effectiveness and School Improvement model, were able to overcome adverse circumstances and ensure the quality of education and high USE scores. A school falls into the category of resilient schools if it has more than 30% of children with a low index of family educational resources and more than 10% of children reach the third level of literacy (there are

only six such levels). According to the Federal Institute for Educational Quality Evaluation, only 10% of resilient schools are at risk.

Researchers at the HSE University have studied the educational trajectories of children from resilient schools. During the transition to high school, a clear social elevator is at play. More children make it to grade 10 in resilient schools than in completely dysfunctional schools and in schools with “problem-free” children and poor outcomes.

However, when moving from school to university, graduates from resilient schools still lag behind – the social elevator stops working for them. More children from resilient schools than from disadvantaged schools enter universities, but fewer than those from schools for well-off children with both good and poor learning outcomes. Thus, resilient schools make it possible to smooth out inequality, but only partially. In this situation, the laws of low social origin and poor family capital, which we pointed out above when considering the dysfunctions of the USE, apply.

The case of Russian LEO schools and resilient schools demonstrates the shortcomings of an educational policy that does not fully provide for overcoming the academic failure of schoolchildren from low-resource schools, families, and territories. The schools at risk, even with some support from the authorities, cannot provide their graduates with motivation to continue their studies, orientation towards higher education, a sufficient level of knowledge for studying at university, and, of course, material resources. Accordingly, students from such schools cannot be considered academically successful.

In this part of the article, we have focused on the problem of Russian “inefficient” schools and those factors that affect the situation of educational failure in them. However, in addition to the locally existing circumstances, it should be borne in mind that such schools are also under pressure from the general social context of the educational failure of young students. Recent studies show that Russian education is steadily moving towards becoming a estate education, and the institutional mechanisms of transition from secondary school

¹⁰ Vtorchermet (Vtorchik) is the name of a remote working-class district of Yekaterinburg distinguished by a high level of social adversity.



to higher education actively contribute to this [38]. The considered case of “inefficient” schools is another proof of the ineffectiveness of the government educational policy in terms of overcoming educational inequality.

Moreover, many other government initiatives aimed at equalizing educational chances paradoxically generate other forms of educational inequality. Thus, the digitalization of Russian education, actively implemented with the support of the Federal project “Digital Educational Environment”, leads to the emergence of new forms of digital inequality, including in the pedagogical environment. Despite government support, Russian schools still have different levels of development of the material and technical base, the formation of digital competencies among students, teachers and their parents.

In the same perspective, it is possible to evaluate the practices of competitive selection of pupils in educational organizations or classes implemented by Russian schools. Despite the fact that such practices are not legally permitted, and school enrollment is conducted according to the priority principle of territorial registration, the most prestigious schools often use selective selection.

Expert interviews have shown that the practice of dividing students into classes (“strong class” with successful pupils, “weak class” with unsuccessful pupils) has signs of stigmatization. It manifests itself in the linguistic labeling of classes: “strong” classes are usually designated by the first letters of the alphabet, “weak” classes by subsequent letters, teachers call classes with unsuccessful students “difficult”: “In schools, I often see the same situation, when in each parallel there are selected classes, “good” and weak, “bad”. Of course, parents try to get their child into a strong class. Someone understands that for this, the student must be very well prepared for school. If we are talking about high school students, then you need to show yourself a diligent student. As a rule, the strongest classes are classes “A” and “B”. The further down the alphabet, the more often the class turns out to be weaker, problematic” (female, 49 years old, school teacher, teaching experience – 26 years).

Stigma entails not only the linguistic and semantic labeling of classes with unsuccessful pupils, but also their inequality in resource provision. So, in most cases, not the strongest teachers work in a class with weak pupils. Strong teachers prefer to work with “good” classes. It is noteworthy that teachers often support such a distribution of students and teachers themselves: “I think it’s the right decision to divide classes according to student performance, because in a classroom where all the guys are “even” it’s easier to work and achieve results. The problem is that some colleagues don’t want to work with difficult classes. They are often assigned to new or young teachers who are still adapting themselves. Sometimes there are suggestions to mix classes to “pull up” the laggards, but they quickly fade away. Parents of students in “good” classes are very indignant. And it is not beneficial for the school administration when the indicators decrease” (female, 54 – years old, school teacher, teaching experience – 22 years).

The situation is aggravated by the fact that lower requirements are deliberately imposed on unsuccessful pupils, preventing the very possibility of a “growth zone”. As for the school administration, it supports such selection in order to ensure high performance indicators of the institution by concentrating educational success and failure in different classes.

Thus, in the analyzed situations, the “Matthew effect” is clearly manifested, well described in the scientific literature: “strong” educational organizations and educationally successful students become stronger, “weak” organizations and unsuccessful students become weaker, the gap between them grows catastrophically. Government support measures ensure that “inefficient” schools meet the minimum level of their compliance with the requirements of “success”, while effective schools receive additional impulses of accelerated development.

The pitfalls of “picking winners”. Next, we will analyze another institutional instrument that influences the current problematic situation. We are talking about special privileges for university entrants who win prizes in special intellectual competitions and contests while at school. We will interpret

this tool based on the concept of “picking winners”.

The institutionalization and scaling up of the “picking winners” policy took place in the 2010s, when the Russian Academic Olympics (RAO) became a mass movement. Over 5 years (from 2018 to 2022), the share of participants in the school stage of the RAO¹¹ increased by 14%, and the share of those taking part in the municipal stage by 8%. On average, 23% of school-stage participants take part in the municipal stage. In 2022, about 7 million schoolchildren took part in the school stage, and 6,000 high school students took part in the final stage, with 499 receiving winners’ certificates and 2,436 prizes.

Winning the RAO still puts university applicants at an advantage. However, the functions of the contest as an institutional instrument have changed significantly since Soviet times.

For the state, the RAO ensures the implementation of the “concept of a nationwide system for identifying and developing young talents” (adopted in 2012). The intellectual contest movement is part of the state infrastructure for supporting talent, which also includes the “Talent and Success” foundation and the educational centers “Sirius”, “Golden Ratio”, “Artek”, “Smena”, “Orlyonok”, and “Ocean”. Every month, 800 children from all regions of Russia come to Sirius, which has the status of a special federal territory¹². The “Golden Ratio” foundation for supporting talented children and youth trained 1,423 people in 2020 and 2,088 people in 2021¹³.

For universities, the institutional talent management mechanisms developed in recent years have become essential tools for attracting applicants with good indicators that reflect the quality of admission. In turn,

the quality of admission is a marker of institutional effectiveness and reputation. Since 2010, the Higher School of Economics has been monitoring the quality of university admissions, and the results act not only as an information base, but also as a tool for rating Russian universities that applicants are guided by.

For students, participation in the RAO has become a separate institutionalized track for entering university, since winning ensures admission without having to go through the standard selection process. Previously, state-funded places in universities were distributed in such a way that there would be enough for both contest winners and those who went through the standard selection procedures. Now, there is very often a situation when, after the winners have used their right to preferential admission, there are too few or no state-funded places left.

According to statistics, most of the winners enter highly selective universities, especially universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Table 3). The USE and RAO thus stimulate the outflow of talented young people from the regions and their concentration in the country’s prestigious universities. The rest of the students with average and low levels of educational achievements are concentrated in universities located in other regions of Russia.

In 2022, of the regional universities, only the Ural Federal University named after the First President of Russia B.N. Yeltsin (165 people) and Tomsk State University became the most attractive for “winners of RAO”¹⁴. In total, the share of winners of RAO enrolled in regional universities was 13.6%.

The question arises: do the USE and the Talent Support System help overcome educational inequality and academic failure on a national level? The most likely answer is no. They lead to successful students concentrating in prestigious, selective universities, which does not reflect the general situation with students’ educational success in the higher education system.

¹¹ RAO is carried out in 4 stages: 1 – school stage, 2 – municipal stage, 3 – regional stage, 4 – national (final) stage.

¹² “Sirius”: Educational center [Electronic resource]. Available at: <https://sochisirius.ru/o-sirius-use/obschaja-informatsija> (accessed 19.07.2024).

¹³ Annual report of the “Golden Ratio” Foundation for the Support of Talented Children and Youth [Electronic resource]. In: Website of the “Golden Ratio” Foundation for the Support of Talented Children and Youth. Available at: <https://zsfond.ru/o-fonde/missiya/> (accessed 19.07.2024).

¹⁴ Monitoring the quality of university admission – 2022 [Electronic resource]. In: Website of the HSE University. Available at: <https://ege.hse.ru/rating/2022/91645021/all/> (accessed 19.07.2024).

Table 3. The number of students enrolled in highly selective Russian universities without entrance examinations

University	The number of students enrolled in state-funded places, people	Number of students enrolled without entrance examinations, people	Proportion of students enrolled without entrance examinations, people, %
Lomonosov Moscow State University	3,931	491	12.5
HSE University	2,540	1,074	42.3
St. Petersburg University	2,173	333	15.3
Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation	1,454	442	30.4
ITMO University	1,301	609	46.8
People's Friendship University of Russia	1,090	159	14.6
Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology	1,005	471	46.9
National Research Nuclear University MEPhI	1,055	297	28.2
National University of Science and Technology "MISiS"	730	159	21.8
MGIMO University	401	86	21.4

Source: Compiled and calculated by the authors according to Monitoring the quality of university admission – 2022 [Electronic resource]. In: Website of the HSE University. Available at: <https://ege.hse.ru/rating/2022/91645021/all/> (accessed 19.07.2024).

It is worth summarizing the results of four studies of students' educational success in highly selective and non-selective universities: a study conducted at Moscow State University (2011), a study conducted at the International Institute of Economics and Finance of HSE University (2011), the interuniversity study "Academic success of first-year university students in Russia" (2010), a joint study by Moscow State University and RUDN University (2021). It should be noted that there are no systematic or national comparative studies of this issue in Russia. Our focus is on data from local studies, which, despite their limitations, provide insight into students' academic success and difficulties. We draw four conclusions based on the analysis of the data of these studies.

The first conclusion suggests that the winners and prize-winners of the contests demonstrate significantly higher academic achievements than students who were enrolled in universities based on USE scores. Representatives of this group have published research articles more often than other categories (one in five), have mastered information technologies, learn foreign languages, and continue to participate in intellectual competitions, achieving high results at the national and international

levels. Based on these data, the state initiative to develop RAO as a tool for selecting successful students could be considered effective.

The second conclusion suggests that the effect of the academic excellence of the winners lasts only for 1 or 2 years; later, the level of educational success becomes equally high for the winners of national contests and for students with high USE scores. This indicates that the quality of education in highly selective universities makes it possible to equalize the level of academic success among different groups of students with the same initial educational background. This conclusion means that institutional initiatives at the university level cease to play a significant role, yielding to the influence of internal organizational factors (strong human resource potential, the university's material and technical resources, etc.).

The third conclusion emphasizes the role of non-cognitive factors in academic success. The first factor is the expulsion of underachieving students in the first year. The second factor is the personal qualities of successful students, such as perseverance, determination, a high level of motivation for achievement and gaining knowledge, and a focus on results. This conclusion does not



prove the positive role of institutional initiatives, but evidences the great importance of the university's internal educational policy and the students' non-cognitive capital.

The fourth conclusion is that different institutional grounds for entering a university form a heterogeneous student flow in terms of the quality of training, the realization of individual abilities and inclinations, and the level of motivation and requirements. The prize-winners of national contests for schoolchildren, indeed, form the most promising, motivated, and academically successful group of students. However, the variable grounds for entering a university and the heterogeneity of the student body lead to conflicts and contradictions within higher education. This conclusion shows the dysfunctionality of the institutional solutions that imply various tracks of admission to Russian universities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Russian educational policy is focused on solving global problems of education: overcoming inequality in education, improving its quality, and, through this, improving the quality of young people's human capital. As we can see, the declared goals generally correlate with the UN's sustainable development goals. Nevertheless, this study shows that these goals are not fully achieved, and educational policy instruments are not always effective.

The positive vector of Russia's educational policy is reflected in the documents for strategic planning for the development of education (the national project "Education", the federal project "Success of every child", etc.). The state initiatives developed by policymakers seem to be based on best global practices in solving these problems and should have led to success. In the final part of the article, we will try to explain the reasons for this problematic situation.

Interpretation 1. The institutional instruments analyzed (the Unified State Examination, the 500+ project, Russian Academic Olympics) have a predominantly selective function. They contribute to the selection of "successful" and "unsuccessful" students, but do not affect the foundations of their educational success or failure. The key to successful preparation for the USE or RAO is not institutional or

organizational resources, but the capital of the family (financial, cultural, educational, and social capital and family investments). That is, educational success is not determined by state investment in education and students' educational success.

The positive effect of the 500+ project, aimed at supporting schools at risk, was that schoolchildren from disadvantaged families and territories achieve success in passing the USE and thus get at least a minimal chance of continuing their education at university. However, students from the risk group cannot realize this chance, since neither the family nor institutional elevators can provide them with upward mobility when transitioning from school to university. Nevertheless, the example of this government initiative shows the great potential of such support projects for overcoming academic failure. These projects can be viewed as the basis for overcoming inequality in education at its very basic levels. They are state investment projects in the future of youth.

Meanwhile, Russian educational policy to a greater extent cultivates and finances selection mechanisms, thereby realizing the dominant principle of "supporting winners" or "skimming". Thus, the "Matthew effect" clearly manifests itself, which consists in the uneven distribution of benefits to some social actors who already possess them, while other subjects, initially deprived, are deprived even more and, therefore, have fewer opportunities for further success.

Interpretation 2. Educational policy in Russia has long ignored the very problem of the decline in the quality of school education, which has negative effects on higher education as well. Today, there is a wide global experience of overcoming the academic failure of various groups of students – those from socially disadvantaged families, those living in depressed areas, those with disabilities, dyslexia, children from migrant families, etc. This experience is relevant for Russian school education, since schoolchildren's academic failure is distinguished by its sources and causes. Overcoming schoolchildren's academic underachievement is primary in relation to university students' educational success. And this problem can be solved by taking into account existing international experience.

At the moment, the lack of systemic institutional solutions for overcoming academic failure makes mechanisms for improving the quality of university admissions ineffective. Such mechanisms have a positive effect only on highly selective universities. They do not solve the problem of the concentration of academic failure in low-resource regional universities.

The analysis of educational policy measures in the context of overcoming academic failure reflects some latent contradictions in the Russian education system. First of all, there is inconsistency in the tracks of transition from school to university. There are only five tracks: USE; winning the RAO; use of the quota (ethnic minorities, children with disabilities); admission sponsored by enterprises; admission to a university after a vocational college. This article examined only two tracks, but even such analysis showed the risk of heterogeneity in terms of readiness for university studies. Since there are no adaptive (“levelling”) programs or courses for students of different levels at Russian universities, such heterogeneity is fraught with either a decrease in the overall quality of education (in mass universities) or an increase in dropouts (in highly selective universities).

Another latent problem identified in this study was the inadequacy of the tools for assessing school leavers’ knowledge and skills. A comparative analysis of the USE with similar exams in other countries shows

its limited nature and low efficiency as an assessment and selection tool. Studies of the academic performance of students in highly selective universities have shown that the success of their studies is mediated by such non-cognitive factors like motivation for achievement, cognitive interest, and perseverance. However, the USE does not assess these qualities, and preparing for the exam turns into coaching for the tests.

This study’s general conclusion is the following: the tools for overcoming academic failure should be developed (improved) by policymakers by taking into account the other issues that Russian education is facing. Borrowed institutional solutions must be adapted to the “depth and breadth” of national characteristics in order to unleash their potential and achieve the most important goals of education.

The results obtained in the study are of practical importance. They are important for developing support measures for various groups of students experiencing academic difficulties. The study shows the directions of improving the educational policy of Russia in the context of overcoming academic failure at both the institutional and organizational levels. The study indicates the need for further consideration of the latent consequences of ongoing government programs and projects in the field of education. In a practical sense, this will help to increase the effectiveness of institutional measures to overcome the academic failure of students.

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