Soviet computer education

Teething troubles galore

SOVIET plans to introduce computer studies in the senior forms of every school throughout the Soviet Union may be delayed by up to six years, according to the Uzbek historian, U. Mannanov, a member of the joint commission on information science and computer technology. Launched by a resolution of the Council of Ministers of the USSR and the Communist Party central committee in March, the plan was one of the first major decisions of the Gorbachev era, and was widely acclaimed as the next significant step in implementing the "scientific and technological revolution". Computer studies were already operating on a pilot scale in Soviet schools, but the essential feature of the new plan was its universality — every school was to have microcomputers, and every 15- and 16-year-old would learn how to use them.

Fifteen pairs of blue jeans and a personal computer.....?

From the beginning, there seemed to be some doubt as to whether the hardware would be ready in time. At the end of March, the director of the Institute of Teaching Content and Methods of the USSR Academy of Pedagogic Sciences, Professor Vadim Monakhov, admitted that the choice of computers to install would be determined by availability, not suitability. In the event, many schools failed to get their computers and, when the new term began in September, were informed that they would have to teach "theoretical" computer studies until the hardware arrived. At the same time, leading articles in *Pravda* hailed the introduction of universal computer studies as a major advance in the building of a truly science-orientated society, implying that the delay in installing the computers was a fairly short-term one. Mannanov's revelation of the likely length of delay was made only in *Pravda Vostoka* (Eastern Truth), a provincial newspaper not normally available in Moscow.

Another problem is a shortage of teachers able to teach computer studies. During the vacation, summer schools were organized for the physics and mathematics teachers who would be taking the new courses. According to Mannanov, of those attending the courses

in the Uzbek SSR, 92 per cent had previously never seen a computer.

Although the logistic problems of computer education are obviously worse in the Soviet Union, where editions of textbooks (and now of software packages) have to be envisaged in editions of 4 million, several Comecon countries seem to be experiencing similar difficulties. Poland, with barely a thousand computers in schools, has declared a moratorium in practical computer education for at least two years. Even so, it seems that a large number of pupils are already computer-literate, either from official youth club facilities or through access to "privately acquired" Western computers, of which there are thought to be between 25,000 and 60,000 in the country.

Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, in

spite of an admitted 40 per cent shortfall in deliveries of computers to secondary and vocational schools, has declared computer education one of the two major priorities for the current academic year (the other is peace studies). In Bulgaria, one of the main producers of computers in the Comecon bloc, not all schools even in the capital, Sofia, have their own computers, and some use facilities which properly belong to the higher education sector.

Only in Hungary does computer education seem to be running to schedule. The Hungarians, moreover, seem more aware than many of their Comecon partners of the broader applications of classroom computers, so that during his visit to Britain last month, the Hungarian minister of education and culture, Dr Bela Koepecsi, particularly requested a visit to a secondary modern school where computers are used not only in the mathematics and science classes but also in the humanities.

Vera Rich

Japanese psychiatry

Hospital reforms under way

Tokyo

THE first steps towards reform of Japan's mental hospitals were taken last week with the publication of a new set of guidelines by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Criticism of the way hospitals are run has been mounting for some years but the ministry showed little reaction until visits from human rights organizations, including the International Committee of Jurists (see *Nature* 316, 571; 1985), stimulated international criticism.

The chief aim of the new guidelines is to give patients in mental hospitals the right to communicate with the outside world. The almost total isolation of mental patients has been seen as a major factor in allowing recent abuses to take place. At the Utsunomiya Hospital, where violence was regularly used against patients and two were alleged to have been beaten to death, patients tried to communicate with the outside world by launching paper aeroplanes. Earlier, an incident at an Osaka hospital where a patient was beaten to death by hospital staff came to light only through the chance discovery of a message from one of the patients. He had written the message on a piece of paper, wrapped it around a stone and thrown it out of the hospital grounds.

Three new provisions are made: public telephones will be installed in closed wards and patients will be free to use them as they wish; patients will be allowed to correspond with anyone they like, including lawyers and human rights groups; and staff will not be present when visitors are received, unless specifically invited. Furthermore, it is recommended that the telephone numbers of human rights organizations be freely displayed.

Critics are far from satisfied: they point

out that the new guidelines are just guidelines and fear they will not be obeyed. They also stress that loopholes exist: communication can be limited if required for medical treatment or protection of patients, while letters may be examined if there is any suspicion that patients might, for example, be trying to send drugs out of the hospital. The only counter to possible misuse of these clauses is that any restrictions placed on patients must be entered on their medical records.

What many groups pressing for reform would like to see are the kinds of changes requested by the International Commission of Jurists, chiefly the setting up of a completely independent review tribunal that would have the right to inspect mental hospitals and to which patients would have right of appeal. At present a patient may be committed to a mental hospital by the superintendent of a mental hospital once the guardian's consent has been obtained and patients have no rights to demand independent medical evaluation. This problem may be tackled in a reform of the Mental Health Act promised by the government for next year.

Whatever legal changes are made, there will remain the difficulties of effecting the changes in attitude that lie at the root of the problem. Although a reform movement exists, and a small number of "half-way houses" and workshops have been set up to help patients back into society, the mentally ill remain outcasts. A quarter of the patients in mental hospitals do not receive even one visit a year. And as many as half the patients could be released from the hospitals if their families were willing to have them back. It is these attitudes that will eventually have to be tackled.

Alun Anderson