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**The effect of the new school-leaving exam of history on the  
reformation of history teaching**

(The domestic and international context of the development of the new school-leaving exam of history, its idea of literacy, its approach to knowledge, its requirements and effects on curricular contents, on textbooks, on pedagogic practise and teacher training).

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# **I. MOTIVATION FOR THE CHOICE OF THE SUBJECT, OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

## **1. Motivation for the choice of the subject**

Related to the turn of the century along with the generalization of mass education and the constant increase of educational expenses due to the challenges of international competitiveness, together with the development of the economy of knowledge it became more and more important for every country to monitor the indicators of effectiveness and successfulness of public education. Several country's response to this challenge was to introduce repetitive surveying systems and to alter as well as to vest school-leaving exams with new functions, especially those proceeding within public education. In several countries the exams providing the output function, the final – or comprehensive exams have a significant role amongst the exams, these signify as „passports” and/or „visa” into the world of higher education or work. Exams play a more and more determining role in the quantitative and qualitative regulation of public education and their effect points beyond the exam's function of output regulation. The fact that some countries attempt to solve the quick reform of their gradual systems by the revolutionistic output regulation also plays a role in the appraisalment of exams. Therefore the intended effect of the exams expand to the alteration of the concept of knowledge, to the revision of the tutorial process, as well as to the development of a new generation of school equipments assigned to the process.

In Hungary, the school-leaving exam has been serving for more than 150 years – true, with variable intensity – both practically and symbolically that „regulatory function of circulation”, which assigns the subsequent place of the individual in the social structure. The exam is also an important indicator of the development of educational processes, as well as the criteria of admission to higher education. The transformation of the traditional curricular regulation in our country also played a role in shifting the focus on the function of output regulation, since the central requirements (central, normative curricula) being at work for several decades had been replaced by the frame-like (the „core curriculum” type) lax and flexible creation of curriculum that acts upon the local practise and builds upon the competences to be acquired. In line with this, the broadening of the sustentative pluralism in the school system, as well as the depute of decisional licenses to the committees of educators and pedagogues significantly narrowed down – in the field of public education that belongs to

everyone – the possibilities and domains of the central educational management and control, the emergence of state guarantee.

At the time of the turn of the century, related to the inauguration of the new school-leaving exam – consequential from the above and from the slowing-down of modernisation of the content – the requirements of the educational policy connected to the reformation of the examination system had widened. Thus the politics of education assigned those objects to the transformation of the examination system – that hold forth results already in the short run – that are connected to the alteration of the concept of knowledge, to the application of the new surveying and assessment practise, to the spreading of the student-centred tutorial practise, as well as to the development of school equipments.

The new paradigms of the teaching of history in the European practise can be traced back to the 1970's. Several references of the shift in the approach that took place at the time occurred in the domestic practise of the 80's (vocational training, vocational classroom etc.), but following the democratic transition these impulses weakened, and the formerly dominating teacher-centred (frontal) teaching practise came into general use. The new National Core Curriculum introduced in 1995 – though aimed at achieving it – could not bring about substantive change in the daily tutorial practise, thus the new school-leaving exam of history inaugurated in 2005 attempted to place the teaching of history in high schools „on a new orbit”, considering the domestic traditions and the international challenges.

## **2. Objectives of the research**

The research basically looks at the domestic process of development between 1996-2006 in terms of exam standards applied in practise in several countries of the world, and from the viewpoint of the paradigm shift that took place in the study of history, in the theory and practise of international didactics of history. The dissertation undertakes the analysis of that model-like process in the mirror of the exam results of the first years, which reveals the components of the paradigm shift – an important subject from the viewpoint of the national consciousness, too – on the transition point of the public and higher education. It presents the different stages, the documents and its results, also apparent in data, of the adaptational process. It analyses the impact of the elements and methods of the exam development process on the renewal of the teaching of history, on the recipients of the development and on the contributors of the process. In support of this, the paper presents three sections of the process:

- a) The antecedents of exam development, its domestic and international context (Chapter 1 and 2),
- b) The process, products and results of the adaptational model (Chapter 3, 4 and 5),
- c) The effects of exam development (Chapter 6 and 7).

### **3. The content of the chapters**

**The introduction of the school-leaving exam, the forms and extent of state control, its constant and variable functions, the place and role of the subject of history in the school-leaving exam until the democratic transition** (Chapter 1).

The first chapter of the dissertation attempts to demonstrate how state control influenced the exam itself, the tutorial process and to describe the problems initiating the debates of certain eras, from the introduction of the school-leaving exam in 1850. It also states that the most representative elements of discourses were the changing goals of the teaching of history (national commitment, internationalism etc.), the different selectional viewpoints concerning the content (the extent of the Hungarian and world history, the relation of political and social history etc.), and the methodological alternatives affecting the everyday tutorial practise. The chapter elaborates on the characteristics of the approaches to history that developed during the different eras, on the emergence of constant and variable functions of the school-leaving exam and on the altering statuses of the evolution of central requirements and autonomy of subject teachers.

**The international context of the development of the new exam in history, with particular regard to the changing notion of history and knowledge, to the idea of literacy, and to the role of exams** (Chapter 2).

The second chapter introduces the features of the paradigm shift that took place in the 1990's in the interpretation of the study of history and knowledge by the instance of a few European countries, and the components and the different viewpoints of the interpretation of the didactics of history. It processes the international procedures determining the period of exam development and the decade preceding it and those results that were significant in the improvement of the teaching of history and the development of examination systems. It states that not only the aspects of processing and the content of the curriculum had changed in the teaching of history but the tutorial practise had been altered significantly, too, since strategies based on studental activity came into prominence. It also records that the intentions of exam

development in Western Europe during the 1990's also aimed at the standardization of assessment and the establishment of objectivity in the assessment of results along with the vindication of changes in the interpretation of knowledge, and the directions of development and criticism of the indicative role of exam results and the function of predictive validity were conceived as central questions nearly everywhere, too.<sup>1</sup>

**The domestic environment of the development of the new exam in history, the main stages of exam development, the legal and pedagogic documents of the exam (requirements, exam model, tasks, assessment guides) (Chapter 3)**

The third chapter processes the „climate for teaching history” following the democratic transition, and introduces by this the professional environment in which the almost ten-year long exam development took place. It examines one by one the different stations of the creation of the exam model and its changes, it points out the correspondence between the task development and its probation. It demonstrates the main decision points of the exam developmental process and the changing aspects of the professional public life. Interprets the background of the exam conception, also the content of the effected documents, and the advantages and disadvantages of the joint appearance of the legal and pedagogic regulation. It states that the successful management of the exam developmental process was enabled by making compromises, by the experience in handling conflicts, by the inner self-movement of the developmental work for the actuation of the self-correction system, and by the constant insertion of the innovational elements. It reveals that the efficiency of the exam development was also guaranteed by the common conviction of the participants that the change can only be fruitful if it represents the aspects of preservation and reformation simultaneously, but also represents the claim for consistency and the need for variation.

**The analysis of exam requirements, the internal coherence, the comparison of requirements and tasks, reference to international features (Chapter 4)**

The fourth chapter analyses the list of competences recorded in the exam requirements with the method of statistical analysis, and the relation of topics in terms of disciplinary and content regulations recorded in the description of the exam. It looks at the incidence rate of the list of competences and the components of the content on the grounds of the exercises of the first few years of examination, and analyses the background of this. It compares the description of competences of the exam requirements and the exercise-types with the ones

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<sup>1</sup> *Zsuzsanna Horváth–Judit Lukács* (2005): The secondary school-leaving exam. *Új Pedagógiai Szemle*, 4th issue

defined in the exam documents of a few European countries. According to the processed data, it comes to the conclusion that the inner coherence of the detailed exam requirements is relevant, the exercise-types conform the European trends, but the list of competences has to be simplified by determining the wider focuses, it needs to be complemented by integrating operational levels, relying on the key competences newly elaborated in the European teaching of history. It was also formulated furthermore, that when correcting the content domains, it is still necessary to take into consideration the identity-forming function of the collective narratives, the covert but existing expectations of social public literacy.

### **The presentation of the results of the school-leaving exam between 2005-2006, their analysis, opinions of the subject teachers, the possible directions of development (Chapter 5)**

This section of the dissertation presents the exam results of the first two years and connected to these it records the inauguration of the new school-leaving exam of history can be seen as a success despite the supposed risks, since the exam results accomplished the practise of the former years, and the new exercise-types surveyed adequately students' achievements as compared to the possibilities. In the framework of the analysis of the results it comes to the introduction of the differences between the reliability of the oral and written assessment, to the examination of the functioning of tasks of the worksheet and of aspects of the analytical assessment focusing on competences and practise. An opinion poll from a narrow sample taken in the beginning of 2007 will be exposed, which analyses the receptivity of the new school-leaving exam of history by the teachers. In the ending section of the chapter – relying on the revealed morals – those correctional proposals will be drawn that are necessary regarding the further improvements of the standardizational elements of the exam of history and the reliability of it.

### **The effect of the new exam of history on the content of curriculum and on the variable market of school equipment (Chapter 6)**

The chapter introduces that the inauguration of the new school-leaving exam of history created a new competition. Several new, mostly colourful editions were published. The comparative statistical analysis indicates that in the comprehension of the publications a source-centred history and an activity-based processing of the curriculum dominated, and the quantity of lexical data decreased as compared to the previous years. The rate of pictures, figures and maps increased, while their illustrative function lessened since some kind of task

was attached to each of them. When assessing the results it also has to be taken into consideration that a new decree of textbooks came into force in 2004, which also preferred those changes propagated by the school-leaving exam. The paradigm shift that is aimed at the learning to learn, can also be pointed out in the comprehension of learning in the textbooks, though the correlation and the realization of the coherence is still incomplete in this area. An essential shift took place concerning the development of digital curricula, which is linked to the fact that the competition on the market of textbooks induced the creation of new learning systems (book, workbook, website, CD).

### **The effect of the exam on the pedagogic practise in high-school, on the domestic theories of subject pedagogy and on the requirements of teacher training (Chapter 7)**

The chapter presents how most subject teachers followed the process of the exam development with doubts in a controversial environment of educational policy. In the year of introduction and afterwards, subject teachers made a serious progress in learning the creation of guides for tasks and assessment, the use of necessary computer skills and the new role of examiner. The new exam situation improved the tutorial cooperation within the institutions in several cases, and the A level oral exam improved cooperation between the intitutions, too. A shift is traceable in the work of teachers – compared to the observations of 2001 – from the verbal monologist methods towards the individual acquisitional studental activity and towards the organization of differentiated learning. The depth of the changes and the durability of the innovational elements can only be estimated today. The effect of the new school-leaving exam can be unambiguously seen in the educational documents determining the MA section of the new system of university education, though the situation of subject pedagogy has not changed significantly in the higher education, it still seems that both students and institutions take it as a second-rate subject.

## **II. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH**

*1. Choice of subject.* The actuality of the choice of subject for the dissertation is supported by the fact that the school-leaving exam introduced in 2005 is still a subject of serious debates, and the society's wide publicity – beyond the professional enquirers – is interested in the questions of content and methodology.

*2. The overview of the 150-year old history of the domestic school-leaving exam.* The processing of the documents lead to the recognition that along the functions, goals and

methods of state control, the ideology, idea of literacy and conception of knowledge of the given era – in relation with the views on historiography – the exam has changed according to its status in the social mobility.

3. *The introduction of the exam, the examination of its international context.* The analysis further modulated the formerly processed data about learning history, it complemented the already known about the practise of didactics of history and the practise of the exam of history, it also placed, by the comparisons, the domestic school-leaving exam introduced in 2005 into a new light.

4. *The stations of the exam development, the concept and the documents of the exam.* The analysis revealed the several components and the different stations of that model-like developmental process, which with the device of output control, tried to incorporate modernizational elements into both the process of the exam and the preparation. It also revealed those conceptional elements of the complete documents of the exam, which were aimed at the initiation of the changes in the interpretation of knowledge and the assessment of standardizational elements. It also unfolded that the domestic traditions and the new trends and perspectives prevail side by side in the exam requirements.

5. *The analysis of the exam requirements.* It revealed the internal contradictions of the exam documents with the help of statistical and comparative methods, that derived from the hypothetical definition – from its untriedness in practise – of the limitation of the two levels from each other. It points out the perplexities of the functioning of the list of competences and makes a suggestion on how the levelling applied in international practise could contribute to the elimination of dysfunctional elements. On the grounds of the analysis of the exam requirements, it states that the expectations are more extensive compared to the international practise, thus the aspects of the „principle of profoundness” can only prevail circumstantially in the exam practise.

6. *The interpretation and analysis of the exam results between 2005-2006.* It shows by the analysis of statistical data that how much the introduction of the new written exam contributed to the more reliable judgement of studental achievements. It confirms on the grounds of the processed results that the distribution of achievements of the written exam shows the capacity of the students more reliably than the oral exam. It verifies that the achievements required on Level B are dysfunctional in the elite institutions because of the wide „span” and the selective school system. It reveals how the new type of tasks used in the exam validated the demand for the applied knowledge and points out the consequences concerning both the teacher and the student. It reveals the conflicts of the altered functions of

the examiner and the evaluational position and those correctional elements of the exam development that are considered necessary.

*7. The effects of the new exam of history on the curriculum content and on the market of school equipment.* The comparative statistical analysis shows that in the approach of the new textbooks, the source-centred history and the activity-based process of the curriculum dominated. It reveals the achieved results of the task development connected to the individual studental work, identifies the distinct types of tasks and the aspects and forms of evaluation adequately fitting to these.

*8. The exam's effect on the pedagogic practise and teacher training.* It proves by employing a revealing opinion poll from a narrow sample that the school-leaving exam had a significant effect on the everyday life of high-school history teaching, primarily in terms of processing historical sources and applying individual studental tasks. It calls attention to the fact that the depth of the changes and the durability of the innovational elements can only be estimated today, and the achieved results will be „dissolved by the daily practise” if the examination system does not employ a continuous observational and a correctional system built on it.

### **III. THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

The role of the exams and surveys is becoming more and more significant in international directions both in terms of the review of the efficiency of education, the social mobility and the individual career building. The analysis of the direct and indirect effect of the exams can bring new knowledge to the definition of the education control and the strategies of teaching and learning. The teaching of the subject of history and the analysis of its exam can contribute to the review of the state of the all-time historical consciousness, to the research of the narrative way of thinking and the individual and communal identity formation born in the wake of this. It can furthermore help the evolving research of textbooks since it gives empirical feedback on the changes of learning comprehension.

It can contribute to the efforts of didactics of history for recognition in higher education, since it inspires institutions to expand the teaching profession by requiring educators with a rich methodological repertoire based on a modern approach to knowledge.

1. The researches connected to the process of the exam can further be broadened both horizontally and vertically.
2. The processing of the almost simultaneously introduced reforms of school-leaving exam in Hungary with the post-Soviet countries await for assessment.

3. Further observations of the exam is unavoidable, which can also support the designers of curriculum, syllabus and exam in favor of the collective employment of the correctional and innovational systems.
4. The theoretical and practical summary of the teaching of history on an upper level is missing, this would significantly contribute to the adequate answers of teacher training and to the challenges that the profession of subject teachers faces.
5. The critical publication of selected essays from the international literature connected to the teaching of history and the examinations seems necessary, and respectively the publication of reading and textbooks for the public at large.
6. The creation of a digital journal for the teaching of history would be a stop-gap task, which would provide theoretical and practical help for the society of history teachers leaning on the bases of higher education, furthermore, for the ones who have been teaching modern history (social and civic knowledge) without a journal, in order to reach a more successful education of history and social science.