



Changes in the school leaving examination as part of the transformation of secondary school education in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This article treats the school leaving examination in the Czech Republic as an essential part of secondary education. Its current state arises from the transformation of education in schools which followed the fall of socialism in Czechoslovakia in November 1989. It also reflects recent efforts in Czech education to become more democratic, more transparent and more responsive to the increasing competitiveness of the labour market. The conclusion of the article discusses the model of the school leaving examination which comes into force throughout the Czech Republic in 2012.

Keywords: Education, educational system transformation, secondary school, school leaving examination, higher education, education policy

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Introduction

The school leaving examination and research into it are both current topics of discussion in Central European academic circles. What exactly does 'school leaving examination' mean? The Czech word 'maturita' derives from 'maturitas' (Latin) meaning fully grown or adult; the official school leaving examination, sometimes regarded as a test of maturity, completes the period of study at secondary schools and other educational institutions at secondary level. It consists of two essential parts: a written or final test of the set subjects and an oral test, which takes place in front of the examiners; some subjects are decided by them and some by the candidates themselves. A report based on the results is then traditionally issued which becomes a condition for admission to university education or employment requiring applicants with secondary education (Chlup, Kubálek & Uher, 1939, pp. 106-107).

According to the pedagogical dictionary (Průcha, Walterová & Mareš, 2003, pp. 118-119), the school leaving examination is a final examination which completes the period of study at secondary school. Traditionally a prestigious examination entitling candidates to university entrance, it is taken at grammar, secondary and secondary vocational schools in the Czech Republic. Successful completion of the last stages of study is usually a condition for passing it. The examination is administered by a board of examiners.

The school leaving examination itself has a long historical tradition, its introduction at grammar schools dating from 1849. Since then it has gone through a number of changes, the most important of which, during the time of socialism (1948-1989) affected the content of the examination. After the fall of socialism in November 1989, a democratic process began in Czechoslovakia, and subsequently in the Czech Republic after January 1994, which did not leave schools or the school leaving examination unscathed.

Content of the school leaving examination

After the events of November 1989, the school leaving examination remained almost unchanged. Minor changes were introduced in 1991. According to the Czech Republic

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Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, Law Digest No. 442/1992, the content was defined as follows:

- Written element:
 - Czech Language and Literature

- Oral element:
 - Czech language and literature
 - Foreign language
 - Optional subject
 - Optional subject
 - Voluntary subject

Exceptions apply to specialised study. According to the publication of No. 442/1991 in 1991:

- 1) The school leaving examination in grammar schools comprises the examination of Czech language and literature, a foreign language and two other optional subjects. Candidates specialising in mathematics or mathematics with physics are examined on Czech language and literature, a foreign language, mathematics and one optional subject. Those specialising in computer programming are examined on Czech language and literature, a foreign language, mathematics or computer programming and one optional subject. In certain cases, the headteacher of a school specialising in mathematics with physics can, according to the kind of university being applied to, permit the examination of a further optional subject instead of mathematics or computer programming.
- 2) Candidates specialising in mathematics or physics take a written examination in mathematics as well as in Czech language and literature, though not on two successive days.
- 3) When a written examination is set for a foreign language, its content and length is determined by the headteacher, according to §9, article 11.
- 4) The mathematics examination for candidates specialising in mathematics or mathematics with physics contains an oral and a written element. In the latter, the candidate solves two compulsory mathematical problems and two chosen from a further set of four. The written element of the mathematics examination lasts for a

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maximum of 240 minutes. In the oral examination, the candidate takes a set of questions chosen from between 25 and 30 sets. Preparation for oral examinations lasts for 15 minutes. If graphic illustration is required for the solving of a problem, the chairman of the examination committee can extend the time allowed for a further 15 minutes. Individual oral examinations last for a maximum of 15 minutes (publ. 1991).

As a result of inconsistencies between grammar schools over school leaving examination requirements, the Czech Republic Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has, since 1997, been developing a project aimed at standardising the school leaving examination. For this purpose, a centre for the reform of the school leaving examination, CERMAT, was established which prepared a proposal for a new form of the school leaving examination, to come into effect from 2004. The main change was to divide the examination into two parts: a common element taken in all schools, consisting of national written tests in compulsory and optional subjects, and a separate element whose content would be decided by individual schools (Průcha, Walterová & Mareš, 2003 pp. 118-119).

We have already mentioned that many candidates attend grammar schools, but has there been an increase in their numbers? According to data published by the Czech Statistics Office <www.czso.cz>, the number of students passing the school leaving examination at grammar schools went up from 21,198 to 24,743 in the school year 1993/1994, following the breakup of Czechoslovakia and the establishing of an independent Czech Republic. The number went down to 19,348 in 1995/1996, then rose during the next two years before declining again, reaching a low point in 2000/2001 of 12,025. This major decrease in numbers resulted from the requirement, introduced in 1995/1996, that school leaving examination candidates should have completed nine years of school attendance, so that a so-called 'zero class' took the examination after 1995/1996. Since then, there has been a certain amount of fluctuation in the numbers; in 2001/2002 there were 23,006 grammar school candidates passing the school leaving examination, with 18,614 a year later and 23,751 in 2003/2004.

Reasons for the reform of the school leaving examination

The opening of new schools after 1989 made it possible for a wider spectrum of candidates to study for the school leaving examination. This undoubtedly positive development was complicated, however, by the difficulty schools had in guaranteeing that different school leaving examinations were all equally demanding. Various types of schools have varying types of curriculum, and varying qualities of teaching. This is unfortunately reflected in the school leaving examination itself. Successful candidates are offered comparable opportunities whatever school leaving examination they have taken, and this has understandably given rise to a wave of discontent, especially among grammar schools.

The final results of candidates from different educational backgrounds in school leaving examinations do not currently allow a comparison of individual performances to be made. This fact also decreases the value of school leaving examination results, both for universities and for potential employers. Since most of the school population, whatever their educational background, go on to take the school leaving examination, it will become necessary to distinguish between levels of performance, while maintaining comparability.

Meanwhile, school leaving examination results are becoming increasingly unimportant for universities. Instead, they test applicants themselves in order to measure their knowledge and aptitude for study. Passing the school leaving examination is a necessary step towards further study, but it does not provide evidence of real knowledge or the ability to study. The school leaving examination offers proof of a certain level of knowledge and skills, but even for potential employers it has only a formal importance (Why school leaving examinations are being changed 2000).

It is obvious that the school leaving examination needed to be changed. If Czech citizens are to be competitive in a European Union which permits the free movement of manpower, it will be necessary to guarantee that those leaving secondary schools have reached a certain level of education.

With the increasing sophistication required of preparation for employment, it is inevitable that secondary education should be followed by higher professional or university study. This is why there is an emphasis on the development of general education in all types of secondary

school. A similar trend is encouraged in the countries of the European Union, but it is only sporadically enforced in the Czech Republic (compare Why school leaving examinations are being changed 2000).

Initial discussion of school leaving examination reform

Initial discussion of the need to reform the school leaving examination had already begun during the second half of the 90s. As a basis for wider discussion, the Maturant 97, 98 and 99 results were analysed; this provided everyone involved with some unique information, especially about the differences between the various types of schools and the preparedness of their candidates. It introduced the possibility of establishing an educational standard, or the corresponding amount of knowledge which a successful candidate should have. The outcome served to form a hypothesis and a basis for initial models of reform. These then became the subject of public discussion about the nature of a reformed school leaving examination, a discussion lasting several years (compare Koncepční záměr 2000).

The Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport's 'Koncepční záměr' (2000) laid out details of the proposals for reform of the school leaving examination and its subject requirements, based on the above developments.

Discussions about the new form of the school leaving examination are still under way. The director of CERMAT, Jitka Pohanková, stresses that 'Constant improvement of the new form is supported by the cycle of programmes entitled 'Step by step towards the new school leaving examination'. A total of 962 secondary schools (64% of the 1510 secondary schools with school leaving examination classes) took part in the fourth year, under the heading 'Piloting the new school leaving examination'. The 'Step by step towards the new school leaving examination' cycle of programmes, which will continue until 2007, contributes significantly to a widening of the possibilities for self-evaluation within secondary schools. An integral part of the cycle is the annual programme for students with special needs entitled 'A handicap-free school leaving examination'. Every part of the proposed cycle includes new elements of the type proposed for the new school leaving examination (Step by step towards the new school leaving examination 2004).

The new school leaving examination

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The Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport approved the document 'The new school leaving examination' on 4th April 2003. This confirmed their intention to reform the school leaving examination and initiated the process ('The new school leaving examination 2003'). After many weeks of discussion among experts, the government finally accepted the proposal for a new education law on 10th March 2003. This would replace a law affecting elementary, secondary and higher professional schools which had been in place for nearly 20 years and updated 17 times (ČTK 2004).

As Jedlička says, 'When the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport approved the document 'The new school leaving examination 2003' at the beginning of 2003, it confirmed the post-November 1989 intention of reforming the final examination of the secondary stage of education. It can be said that the key purpose of reforming the school leaving examination is to create an instrument of evaluation which will measure whether the candidate has mastered the common core, or statutory minimum, of the general education provided by the secondary curriculum' (pp. 249-50).

What does the new school leaving examination have to offer? As has already been said, current school leaving examinations differ widely according to the schools involved, thanks in part to the supplementary education bill of 1991, when the school leaving examination was left entirely in the hands of individual schools. The new school leaving examination will secure the introduction of national standards common to all types of schools and enable them to be compared. Will the reform make a difference?

Contrary to the original proposal, which provided for two levels of difficulty in the compulsory elements of a common paper, where passing at the higher level entitled the candidate to enter university, the final decision was to settle for a single level, in order to avoid any possible claims of discrimination (Husník, 2003).

The most fundamental change, in fact, is that the new school leaving examination will consist of two parts: firstly, a common element, set for all types of schools to a state-approved national standard, which will test knowledge and skills acquired by all secondary school students; and secondly, an independent element, which will take account of the specialisation

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and type of school. It is also important that in order to pass the school leaving examination, it will be necessary to succeed in both the common and the individual elements.

The common element of the school leaving examination will take place at all schools during the same term in the form of state-approved tests containing both closed and open questions (State-approved common element of the school leaving examination 2000).

All candidates will sit three tests in the common part of the examination. The first will be on the Czech language, involving both written work and an oral test. The second will be on a foreign language, chosen from English, German, French, Spanish or Russian. The third will be on an optional subject, where the candidate can choose either mathematics or a social science option (in the future, natural science, technology or information technology options will be made available).

The written tests will last for 130 minutes. Foreign language tests will contain an oral element lasting up to 30 minutes which will measure the candidate's ability to understand the spoken word.

In the individual or school element of the school leaving examination, the candidate will have to pass three tests. This element of the school leaving examination will be entirely under the control of individual schools. It should assess the knowledge which the school regards as the most important according to its specialisation. It is assumed that the headteacher will identify the first part as compulsory, the second as either compulsory or optional and the third as optional. It might even be decided that all three parts should be compulsory (The new school leaving examination, 2003).

"Czech language and literature should be included as a compulsory subject and, instead of being tested on them separately, candidates should demonstrate that when presented with a literary text, they can understand it, respond to it and express an opinion on it.' (Jeřábek 2000). Further subjects should be chosen by candidates according to their specialisation. Students might take optional tests in future (to add to their qualifications, when applying for

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a job or university place), but these should be limited to a maximum of four (Jedlička, 2003, p.251).

The reform of the school leaving examination and candidates with special medical needs

The reformed school leaving examination also takes into account candidates with special medical needs. It recognises that any special medical need can affect various areas of a student's school work. The proposed reform makes provision for candidates with special medical needs, visual impairment and specific learning disorders. The changes proposed are not intended to decrease the level of difficulty; they will only affect the conditions in which the examination is taken, and the way the papers are presented. In this way the real knowledge and skills of candidates with special medical needs can be compared with those of other candidates: 'The examination will make the same requirements and set the bar at the same height.' (Zielencová, 2001).

Disadvantaged candidates will be able to claim (Smetáčková, 2001):

- time extension
- modification of the form of the examination and the tasks set (eg. exclusion of graphic tasks, brailing of test questions for the visually impaired)
- use of subsidiary aids
- help from assistants and interpreters
- alternative examination methods (ie. other than tests).

So the handicap-free school leaving examination, which is the equivalent of the common element of the school leaving examination, will be accessible to:

- candidates with special medical needs ie. with physical, visual, or auditory impairment, or with further impairment such as autism, speech problems, developmental or behavioural disorders
- candidates with health disadvantages ie. impaired health or long-term illness, or with mild disorders leading to learning or behavioural problems

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In order to reduce the possibility of problems in the introduction of the reformed examination, a feasibility study of the school leaving examination for candidates with special medical needs was carried out in Spring 2001. It included all special secondary schools offering school leaving examination programmes with students in their final year, as well as some ordinary schools which included a higher than average number of candidates with special educational needs. In total, this amounted to 19 schools, with 170 students (Schindler, 2001). It is pleasing that the study showed that the proposed changes were seen as significant and that the schools themselves would have no problems with their introduction.

Reform of the school leaving examination and its effect on universities and colleges

As we observed above, success in the school leaving examination is a precondition for admission to universities and colleges. It is appropriate, however, to enquire how universities will react to the changes in the school leaving examination, and how important they consider them to be. Might it be possible that the school leaving examination will replace entrance examinations for universities and colleges?

As the Deputy Minister for Education, Jaroslav Müller, has said, 'The Ministry is unable to issue a direct instruction to universities and colleges to accept the results of the school leaving examination. However, it can (and does) make them acquainted with the syllabus requirements and attempt to prepare them for the changes, keeping different institutions and faculties informed and encouraging acceptance of the results of the school leaving examinations at all levels.' (Rozhovor 2000).

Pavel Zelený, manager of the Centre for the Reform of the School Leaving Examination, comments further: 'Throughout the preparation of the reform, it has been felt that to include the results of the school leaving examination among the criteria is a significant, but not the most important, aim of the proposed reform. That is all. There has been no mention of replacing university entrance examinations. We will try to convince the universities that the results of the school leaving examination will provide reliable criteria for them' (Rozhovor, 2001).

It is therefore clear that university and college entrance examinations will, for the most part, continue. Unlike what happens at present, however, it might be possible that eventually the often meaningless requirements and questions set by universities will be at least partly compensated for by the results of students in the school leaving examination.

The school leaving examination after 2004

The announcement of the new school leaving examination in 2004 created a general expectation that the first candidates would sit for the SLE in 2008. In the intervening years, a long series of questions and discussions addressed the issue of whether it was really the most suitable model. One of the main objections was that in reality, it would not be possible to introduce the same SLE into entirely different schools (ranging from elite grammar schools to further education colleges). Launching one common examination for all types of secondary schools would mean a significant decrease in difficulty in order to keep the pass rate at an appropriate level so as to maintain its value.

A further objection was, according to František Morkes (2007, p. 6), that the timing of the proposed changes was inappropriate, as it would not be possible for secondary schools to change or explain their curriculums before they were introduced; the SLE changes had occurred before school legislation and key teaching materials were ready. He went on to mention other reasons why the SLE reform would not be successful. He suspected that people involved at the time of its introduction were inadequately qualified, that the first candidates sitting the new examination were unprepared and that with the separation of CERMAT from ÚIV, the connection between SLE results and the Frame educational programme had been lost.

Discontent with the new form of the SLE was widespread, both among specialists and members of the public. This was made clear by Husník (2008, p. 8): 'The threat of a total fiasco and the insistence of the Minister herself, Dana Kuchtová, forced members of parliament to postpone the introduction of the new SLE for about two years so that another, more appropriate, model could be devised.' It might be said that this had become a case of reforming the reform.

In what ways will the school leaving examination be different? What form should the national test take? Almost all the suggestions and amendments made by CZ-21 (A Centralised Examination for the Czech Republic in the 21st Century) have been taken on board. The group had criticised the form of the SLE approved in 2003 over a long period and its original proposal, already made in 2001, more or less corresponds with the form of the SLE currently being discussed. Firstly, it will be possible to sit the school leaving examination at two levels of difficulty. The intention of the SLE is that succeeding at the higher level should be a passport to university. According to Pavla Kubálková (2008), the Minister should be discussing this possibility with university chancellors by the beginning of April 2008.

Another change will be to introduce greater autonomy for headteachers. It will be up to them to decide on the third compulsory subject. Zelený, director of CERMAT (Kubálková 2008), says: 'It means that all candidates will have to sit papers in Czech language and literature, and a foreign language, but that because a third compulsory subject will be necessary, if a headteacher decides that all candidates must sit a paper in mathematics, they will all have to accept it. It will not be possible for a headteacher to make a series of individual decisions.'

What does it mean for schools? Every secondary school will have a duty to prepare its students for the basic level of the SLE. This means that, given the considerable differences between secondary schools, not all types of school will prepare their students for the higher level of the SLE. To avoid disadvantaging students at these schools, it will be possible for all candidates to sit higher level papers in some subjects as required by their schools. It should be remembered that this affects only the compulsory elements of the common paper. These include Czech language, a foreign language and mathematics and, from 2012, civics, social science and information technology. Candidates will not, therefore, have the right to choose the level of difficulty in all their subjects. Reports for SLE candidates will record the level of difficulty for each subject taken.

It is clear that the new model could not be introduced for current students. In 2010, therefore, the school leaving examination will consist of compulsory papers in Czech language and either a foreign language or mathematics, and two or three other papers (in a foreign

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language, civics, history, history of art, mathematics, physics, chemistry or biology). In 2012, the second compulsory paper will change and a third paper will be set, with candidates selecting either mathematics, civics, social sciences or information technology (see Changing the reform model for the school leaving examination, 2008).

As for the compulsory elements, they will be administered centrally and combined together. As CERMAT explains (Komplexní zkouška 2008, unnumbered pages): 'The foreign language element, in contrast with the other papers, will consist of three separate tests:

1. didactic test
2. written work
3. an oral examination in front of examiners

Part of the didactic test will be a listening (aural) subtest.' The model for the school leaving examination described above was approved by the government of the Czech Republic in a session which took place on 2nd April 2008.

Conclusion

The present condition of Czech society has had an influence on the form of the school leaving examination. The drive towards quality assurance, the democratisation of education, transparency in the examination process and efforts to improve competitiveness in the labour market have all had an impact on the shape of the school leaving examination.

On the other hand, there is a trend at present, identifiable in Europe as a whole, to maximise the proportion of the population educated at secondary and university level, and to neglect the original purpose of final school examinations: to confirm that the school-leaver is capable of leading a responsible and independent life. From 1849-1938, the school leaving examination was only a dream for a large number of students, while from 1948-1989 it was devalued into something which, rather than knowledge, reflected political affiliation in the Czechoslovakia of that time.

Today the situation is very different. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the school leaving examination has preserved its special importance and rituals (Skutil, 2004), the constant increase in the number of students sitting the examination has led to it being seen as a

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common phenomenon for which students lack respect, and as having lost some of the value and prestige which it had in the past. It seems, however, that the present two-tier model could restore the school leaving examination to its former status, as the representatives of some Czech universities accept that success at the higher tier of the examination could be a passport to university study without the need for an entrance examination, which has previously been a frequent requirement for university entrance.

The new form of school leaving examination, in its newest form, the two-tier examination, can at least partly, in our opinion, eliminate the problems described above and can contribute significantly to an increase in the knowledge and skills of the secondary school population.

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