

Cedefop Info 1/2005

Slovakia

Slovak secondary VET schools not happy to be a B

A recent decree from the Ministry of Education (1) has provoked a lively dispute among educators. It provides legislative backing for a new model for secondary school leaving exams (maturita) from the school year 2004/05 and aims for valid, nationwide comparable information for all students, parents, employers and subsequent education providers, predominantly higher education institutions. The previous school-based model, with teachers as both educators and examiners, was considered untenable because assessment was not comparable between schools, leading to softening quality standards.

The most important changes include a two-component (internal and external) school-leaving exam and three levels of examining commissions (central/national, school, subject). The internal component follows the traditional school-based examination, setting a new framework for its organisation and content. Examination themes are prepared by subject commissions according to knowledge and skill requirements and specified characteristics, all given in the annex to the decree.

In VET schools a delegate from the professional chamber could become a standing member of the examining commission provided he/she meets relevant professional requirements; an additional expert in practice, even without VET experience, might become an active member of the commission, though without the right to assess.

Students can select from a total 36 subjects. In VET schools, Slovak language and literature and theoretical and practical parts of the vocational exam are obligatory. The theoretical element contains up to 25 themes and the practical up to 15, for each cluster of study sectors. Where instruction is in Hungarian or Ukrainian, students must also be examined in the respective language. All students have the right to take exams in two additional subjects if they wish to do so, with one of the two optional subjects limited to selection of a foreign language.

The new external component (currently only in mathematics, English and German) is standardised test-based. This is the most disputed innovation, mainly because of high demands fuelled by very low scores in prior monitoring. Both students and teachers are afraid that the points scored, and not the percentile, will be considered a quality reference in practice, though this is not intended by the reform. Slovakia faces passionate debate on the experience of this school year reform, with the pros and cons of norm-referenced and criteria-referenced testing a major part.

The second disputed novelty is the introduction of the discrete exam levels A and B (in foreign languages also C). Students are free to decide, where applicable, their exam level as a statement of acquired knowledge and skills. For example 'Level B is the sum of requirements on knowledge and skills of students framed by syllabi (i.e. the centrally set characteristics of the respective subject matter) and target requirements (which were framed by the decree and operationalised by the Catalogue of target requirements by curricular authorities) at basic level'. However, assignment of levels in specific subjects was effectively based on the number of week-hours allocated study in the curriculum, with low input subjects allocated level B

regardless of individual student competence. Exam levels at VET schools have been assigned level B, and surprisingly also in two vocational parts (subjects).

The frustration affecting VET schools because of B-rated maturita subjects could have been prevented. Levels A and B could be interpreted in English as Advanced and Basic but they have no similar interpretation in the Slovak language; using different letters could have prevented this frustration. In a sports-obsessed country like Slovakia, being a B always means being part of a lesser quality team, which is definitely not the case with all VET schools; B graduates might be excellent students and first class professionals. Not to be a B is the slogan of the year 2005 for VET graduates in Slovakia.

(1) No 510/2004 Coll., adopted in August 2004.

(2)

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