

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SLOVENIA

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INTRODUCTION

Education has high priority in Slovenia, not only in the opinion of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia¹ but also in the opinion of the government and the wider public as well. The previous decade was characterised by a number of reforms, which were wide-ranging and fundamental, given the political, economic and social changes, which accompanied the move to independence in 1991. The Ministry drafted the White Paper on Education (*'White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia'*, 1996), which served as the basis for the preparation and adoption of new legislation. Six acts regulating the organisation and funding of education, pre-school education, primary schools, grammar schools, vocational education and training, and adult education were passed in 1996. The curricula and assessment systems were also changed radically between 1995 and 2000. From 1999 onwards the Ministry has been trying to improve the effectiveness and clarity of the system.

TYPES OF EDUCATION IN SLOVENIA

In Slovenia, there are the following types of education:

- pre-school education
- basic education
- secondary education
- post-secondary vocational education and
- higher education (graduate and post-graduate studies).

(See *Appendix 15*.)

Pre-School Education

The system starts with pre-school education, which is not compulsory, except for the one-year school preparation before starting school. Pre-school education is carried out by kindergartens for children between the ages of one and six inclusively and also by childminder families. This covers five years, from one to six years of age. It is divided into two cycles, the first cycle lasting from one to three years of age and the second from three to six years of age.

Between the ages of six and seven all pre-school children have to attend a compulsory one-year pre-school class before entering primary school. This programme will be in force until

¹ From now on in this chapter the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia will be referred to as the Ministry.

the full introduction of the new compulsory basic education system in the school year 2006/2007.

Basic Education

In the period between 1999 and 2006 two systems of basic primary education are running simultaneously. The system being gradually replaced lasts for eight years and is divided into the first four-year class stage and the next four-year subject stage. It is carried out by primary schools for pupils between the ages of seven and 15.

The general objectives of primary schools are:

- to provide pupils with basic knowledge
- preparation for further schooling, professional and private life
- understanding the basic laws of nature, society and man
- development of pupils' linguistic culture and curiosity
- development of a need for ongoing education, good relationships, interests and abilities and
- development of good habits.

Successful completion of the eight years of primary school enables pupils to proceed to education in a choice of secondary schools. Pupils who successfully complete at least six classes in the eight years of primary schooling, thus fulfilling the basic legal compulsory education requirement, can continue their education at a lower vocational school. Music education runs parallel to compulsory education.

Basic education reform

Some fundamental organisational changes have been prepared according to the new legislation. Basic (compulsory) education will be extended from eight to nine years. The nine-year compulsory education will consist of three three-year cycles. The former one-year pre-school classes will be integrated together with the former eight-year primary school into a single nine-year system of compulsory education. The school entering age will be lowered to six. An optional tenth year will be introduced.

While the existing school system has been free from streaming, tracking or any other form of ability grouping, the new system introduces ability groups into maths, foreign language and mother tongue in the last two grades. The new primary school curriculum has already been prepared and is in the process of being adopted gradually from 1999/2000 to 2006/2007.

The novelties of the new primary school curriculum include:

- more emphasis on learning and process orientation, with less focus on content and more on developing cognitive and social skills
- new features such as descriptive assessment in the first cycle
- earlier foreign language teaching
- a wider choice of subjects
- flexible diversification in the last years of school
- non-obligatory external assessment, in two or three subjects after the first and second cycle respectively, (feed-back information for pupils and teachers)

- a combination of teachers' assessment and external assessment at the completion of nine years of schooling.

A few issues have been widely debated among education policy-makers, experts and teachers, parents and the wider public for several years, such as:

- how to assure flexibility and partial differentiation, which will bring more choice to pupils and parents, but will not undermine equal opportunities in subsequent education
- how to develop assessment instruments which will enable teachers to check their teaching results
- what kind of a profile does a foreign language teacher need to teach a foreign language to younger children?

Secondary Education

Secondary education follows the eight-year basic compulsory general education. It is provided by grammar schools and vocationally oriented schools. Programmes, which last between two and four years are designed for pupils between 15 and 19 years of age. Changes in the structure of secondary education were introduced at the beginning of the 1990's. Namely, grammar schools, which have a long tradition in Slovenia (existing since the 16th century), were abolished with the career-oriented reform during the eighties but were re-introduced in 1990. The reintroduction of grammar schools returned the former uniform structure of secondary education to a binary system again, namely grammar and vocational secondary education.

Grammar school education leads to university-type studies. The general goal of grammar schools is the transmission of the knowledge needed for the continuation of studies in higher education. Curricula that have been renewed twice so far, include compulsory subjects, optional subjects and preparation periods for the *Matura* examination. Students take the *Matura* examination at the end of the final year and successful completion enables enrolment at university. The *Matura* is based on examinations, which are set externally and marked partly externally and partly internally. The *Matura* started in all secondary schools in 1995.

Matura courses were introduced for those students who completed technical courses at vocational schools and then decided to enter university. Such students have to obtain a general education by completing these *Matura* courses and then pass the *Matura* examination.

The structure of vocational education has changed due to the reintroduction of grammar schools. Vocationally oriented schools for students from 15 to 19/20 years of age offer a variety of content and levels of difficulty and provide various kinds of vocational and technical programmes lasting from two to five years and, in principle, they all end with a final examination.

In order to enter vocational school, pupils must complete basic education successfully. All vocational programmes lead to the labour market, but four-year programmes lead to a technical qualification, which enables access to professionally oriented further education studies. Vocational school leavers who pass a *Vocational Matura* examination (which differs from the current *Matura*), who have so far only had access to professional studies,

will be given the possibility to gain access to university studies if they pass an additional exam in one subject.

The structure of vocational education includes:

- technical programmes (four years) leading to a technical qualification
- vocational/technical programmes (three plus two years); students complete three-year vocational school and take another two years to acquire a technical qualification
- medium length vocational programmes (three years) leading to vocational qualifications
- short vocational programmes (two years) leading to vocational qualifications; these programmes are open also to pupils who have not successfully completed the eight-year primary school
- very short programmes of vocational training (a few days) designed mainly for unemployed workers
- one-year post-secondary non-tertiary courses
- short vocational courses designed for graduates and school leavers from grammar schools; those students who have not passed the *Matura* and those who have decided to change their vocation can obtain a vocational education by completing these vocational courses and then enter the labour market
- preparatory courses and exams for master craftsmen, foremen and managerial staff meant for those who have completed a three-year vocational school and attained a minimum of three years of work experience; those who pass the master craftsmen exam will be allowed to enrol in a post-secondary vocational college (the network of post-secondary vocational colleges was re-established in 1995) by passing bridging exams from general education subjects. Courses last two years and end with a *diploma exam*. Students receive a diploma bearing the name of the vocational qualification, which enables them to start work in specific occupations. From 1998/99, transition of these graduates to the second year of higher education professional studies has been possible.

Higher Education

Higher education in Slovenia follows a binary model:

- academically oriented university studies and
- professional studies.

Universities and independent faculties established as private institutions offer both types of programmes, while professional higher education institutions provide only professional programmes.

University sector

The basic admission requirement to study on a university programme is the *Matura* exam.

The study is organised at two levels:

- at the graduate level students get a diploma and the first degree is awarded after four to six years of study
- at the post-graduate level of study, an academic degree is awarded: either the title of *magister* (Master's degree) after two further years of study or *doktor* (Doctorate) after four years of study.

In principle, graduates from higher professional studies can transfer into the third or fourth year of university study if the higher education institution approves such a transfer. With effect from the 1998/99 academic year, graduates from the professionally-oriented course for social workers have been allowed direct entry into the *magister* programme, on completion of which they may also embark on a doctoral programme.

Adult Education

Adult education is provided by educational and study centres, schools and higher education institutions, as well as, companies, administrative bodies, organisations and associations. Adult education programmes include in-school and out-of-school education, formal organised learning and independent self-directed learning.

Education of Children with Special Needs

Education of children with special needs is provided either in mainstream education with additional professional assistance, by special classes offering modified curricula in mainstream kindergartens and schools, or by special schools and institutions for the education and training of children with severe disabilities. Changes are being made towards more integrated forms of education for these children.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO FOREIGN/SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING IN SLOVENIA

Slovenia is a small country with considerable interest in foreign languages. Foreign languages were introduced into secondary education in 1951 and in 1957 one foreign language became a compulsory school subject at age 11. The foreign languages offered were: English, German, French or Russian. Although English was widespread, German was offered in schools near the Austrian border and in the region previously populated by Germans. Simultaneously, Serbo-Croatian (as one of the official "state languages" of Yugoslavia) was offered; it had been compulsory before 1951. Russian was retained in the curriculum as one of the less popular alternatives until the middle of the 1960's. After that time only English and German remained as compulsory foreign languages. Later students could choose between English, German, French, Italian or Russian. The most common combination was English and German or English and French. In 1981 the secondary school reform broadened foreign language teaching. Special four-year educational programmes with a linguistic orientation were implemented in which students were offered three compulsory foreign languages. The choice of foreign languages expanded when Spanish was offered.

In 1990 the Slovenian education system reintroduced grammar schools with two or three compulsory foreign languages (three in grammar schools with a linguistic orientation). Latin was also possible as an additional language. Soon after that Classical grammar schools were reintroduced with Latin and Ancient Greek alongside two modern foreign languages. With the introduction of the *Matura* in 1995, the position of foreign languages in secondary grammar education was strengthened. Foreign languages have become compulsory within the *Matura* examination. New language curricula for English, French and Italian were introduced in 1996 and officially adopted in 1998. English prevails as the

first foreign followed by German. Slovenian, Hungarian and Italian are taught in bilingual areas. German, French, Spanish, English, Russian and Italian are available as second or third foreign languages.

In 1983 one of the foreign languages (either English or German) was introduced as an optional subject for pupils under the age 11. Later these pupils had an option to choose one or two foreign languages among extra-curricular activities. Parental interest and the interest of children in learning foreign languages were very high and the majority of schools offered foreign languages as an additional opportunity. As a result of increasing parental interest, a pilot project '*Foreign Language for Young Learners*' started in 1990. 29 primary schools were involved in the project, which introduced the first foreign language subject (English or German) at the age of nine instead of at eleven. Within this project French and Latin were also introduced.

The new primary education system, which will be finalised by 2006/2007, includes three cycles: age six to nine, nine to twelve and twelve to fifteen. At the beginning of the second cycle (age 9) compulsory foreign languages are being introduced.

There is a strong recommendation in the new curricula to learn a second foreign language in the final cycle of primary education as an option.

Examinations and Qualifications

No national examination is required in the foreign language at the end of primary education. Evaluation of results at the end of primary school (age 14-15) is the responsibility of the teacher. However, pupils are expected to reach at least beginner or pre-intermediate language competence and therefore be able to continue at a pre-intermediate or intermediate level at secondary school.

Secondary education is completed when students pass a final school leaving examination for which they have two options: they can either take an internal school-leaving examination or the external *Matura*. In the former students are required to take Slovenian, Mathematics or a Foreign Language and two additional subjects. In the latter there are three compulsory subjects Slovenian, Mathematics and a Foreign Language and two additional subjects. Some subjects can be taken either at basic or higher level.

The aim and the objective of the *Matura* is to ensure the same level of knowledge for all school leavers which should result in better teaching and learning and in a more independent way of learning (learning to learn, autonomous learning). Special subject handbooks have been published for students, teachers and parents as guidelines for the teaching process and self-study. The *Matura* is required for study at university.

Materials for Teaching and Learning a Foreign Language

The national curriculum prescribes the scope of individual subjects, their goals and content. The required course-books are currently designed to promote student activity and co-

operation, to reduce stress, to focus on the students' own needs and creative abilities, and to encourage personal involvement and creativity.

Every school year a list of supplementary material for teaching and learning a foreign language is updated and sent to schools to enable teachers and students to purchase and use these materials in classes or in extra-curricular activities. Teachers use this material in two ways: either as a resource to refresh their knowledge and to get new insights into new approaches or as material to be used along with or in addition to textbooks.

Supplementary material is mostly used to promote motivation and to enhance the learner's capacity to learn and to take more responsibility for his/her own learning.

Extra-Curricular Activities

Within extra-curricular activities students are encouraged to

- set their own learning aims
- integrate what they have learnt into their own experiences
- engage in creative and practical activities, such as stories, diaries, poems, reports, and magazines
- read extensively for enjoyment as well as for the gist and for comprehension of details
- express opinions and articulate personal feelings
- use learning aids, such as video, audio cassettes, computers.

PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

Pre-service teacher training is provided by the two universities, the University of Ljubljana and the University of Maribor (both the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana and the Faculty of Education in Maribor).

In-service teacher training is provided by various educational institutions, the most popular being the National Institute of Education and the two universities. The National Institute of Education is the main driving force for in-service teacher training for foreign language teachers. It was established as a place where programme content would be co-ordinated and the implementation of an all-round system of in-service teacher training would be organised. The Programme Selection Council was designated the only body in charge of programme selection. The programmes chosen are published yearly in a catalogue of continuing teacher staff development programmes. According to the new school law, teachers are obliged to participate in different forms of in-service teacher training (i.e. general didactic, specific methodology) at least 40 hours a year.

The implementation and dissemination of INSET is carried out within the framework of the national foreign language policy and the activities of the Ministry.

Since 1993 Slovenia has been involved in most Council of Europe foreign language learning and teaching concepts and projects at a national level (Common European Framework of Reference, European Language Portfolio).

CONCLUSION

Slovenia still faces many problems in the field of language learning and teaching, such as a lack of teachers, an uneven workload, a lack of teacher trainer training, a lack of local language teaching advisers appointed to the National Institute of Education who are qualified in research and development, a lack of qualified teachers for particular ages (e.g. early language learning), a lack of pre-service teacher training at universities, a lack of experts for in-service teacher training for specific areas, such as curriculum development, language for specific purposes and early language learning. However, since 1951 the Slovenian education system has undergone a number of positive changes, especially in the field of language learning and teaching. The number of languages being taught has increased, foreign languages are now offered at an earlier age, and external school-leaving examinations in foreign languages at a national level have been introduced.

Language learning and teaching stands out as one of the top priorities in the Slovenian education system.