

# Report from the conference “Why History Education? Exams as a Mirror for Teaching and Learning History”, September 14–16, 2023, Luzern, Switzerland

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“Why History Education? Exams as a Mirror for Teaching and Learning History” – was the title of the international scientific conference that was organized by the Institute for History Education and Memory Cultures at the University for Teacher Education of Luzern, which took place in Luzern, Switzerland on 14–16 September 2023.

In his opening message, prof. Peter Gautschi as the organizer of the event drew the audience’s attention to the main question of the conference: Are exams truthful mirrors of teaching? If yes, how exactly do exams “mirror” the purposes of teaching and learning history? Different school systems use different forms of exams (written, oral, combined) at different levels, yet the fundamental problem how teachers’ questions influence the learning process is rather unknown. “Interestingly, not much research on history exams has been made”, prof. Gautschi stated.

In his lecture “History - a school subject under pressure” prof. *Markus Furrer* outlined the most significant reasons of the “pressure”. Not only history as a school subject has lost its national/patriotic character, but it faces new challenges such as the task to contribute to social cohesion, or to raise pupils’ environmental awareness. We are in a difficult position of a deep re-interpretation of the aims of history teaching, prof. Furrer concluded.

In his lecture, prof. *Georg Kreis* analysed the relationship between historiography and history teaching. Following in the footsteps of famous German history didacticians, he concluded that history didactics should be a carefully combination of historical knowledge and pedagogical desire; yet, politics and history should not operate in the same realms.

Five workshops took place at the event, with questions and answers by discussants and participants. The workshops were organized by Karel van Nieuwenhuysse and Sylvain Doussot; Karl Benziger and Terry Haydn; Katja Gorbahn and Jasmine Steger; Adabo Oppong and Anitha Adu-Bohan; Kaarel Haav and Jan Löffström.

Some key issues of the examination process were dealt with in detail during the workshops. The school practices of examination in history teaching range from regular and multi-form testing (GCSE in history in the United Kingdom; Baccalaureate tests in France, for example), to limited testing (Belgium, Denmark and Ghana), to countries where there is no systematic testing in history (Slovakia). The forms of examination and the final goals of the assessment process provide valuable information on the "sense" why our subject is taught. In Luzern, there was a debate on the taxonomical quality of testing history. There seemed to be an agreement among the participants that it is "knowledge" plus "skills" that should be both taught and tested in history education. Yet, "there is tension between knowing and doing history" (*Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse*) which refers to some lack of clarity with what is being understood by "historical thinking". What is the main goal of the history education process - a "clever" or a "competent" pupil? In England, where four basic skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) have been focused on in schools for quite a long time, it is exactly the situation that historical skills are consciously and systematically enhanced by schools, in turn causing many students to feel discouraged to do A-level exams in history because of its complexity.

Several discussants' comments aimed at the challenges how taxonomical quality can be implemented in school history tests. Scientific ideas and structures about the sense of history teaching have been known (e.g. Bloom taxonomy, or "Three dimensions of history education" by *P. Gautschi*); but how can they be implemented in school practice? Many participants argued for balanced measuring. In France, where history is tested together with Geography, the history exam requires a written interpretation of a complex question. *Sylvain Doussot* thinks it is not only the quality of the answer that students give but it should be students' intellectual activity that should also be measured during the exams.

One of the most progressive form of examination we heard in Luzern takes place in Denmark. There is only an oral form of examination there which follows one basic requirement: "The purpose of the exam is to check how students use and communicate history." Based on the assumption that future adults will need historical knowledge more probably in the oral form (rather than in writing), during their tests Danish pupils are required to ask questions, then find answers and finally put together an oral report on certain topics. *Katja Gorbahn* outlined a recent Danish exam where the historical problem over the name of Northern Macedonia was the matter. In the Danish example, it is more the process of gaining information and the ability of putting them in a coherent form that is measured and evaluated.

Testing and assessing always takes place in a certain social and political environment. How do these influence history testing? The Flemish example shows that exams are there under huge pressure from outer circumstances, such as lack of time for marking tests by overloaded teachers, organizational difficulties, a lack of expertise, or a lack of financing.

As *Anitha Oforiwah Adu-Boahen* pointed out, Ghana has been using a written history exam that consists of two papers: an "objective test" and an "essay question". On the one hand she argued for using more sources when teaching history, on the other it was clear from her words that in Ghana the majority of teachers concentrate on "knowledge" rather than on analyzing sources. It was not only the example from Ghana that seemed very different from the supportive educational environment of Denmark, in which finding actual (even "burning") historical issues, asking questions about them, and finding answers to them is in itself *the examination process*. Of course, it can also be a question of what is the history exam is used for? If it is a factor in a student's career (e.g. history exam result counts at the entrance examination to the university) then

considerations over the content, form and quality of the history exam fall under more serious considerations.

Finally, a particular problem which was greatly dealt with in Luzern, was the question of using primary historical sources. Using sources at schools during history examinations is quite common. Yet, almost every participant who touched upon this issue, referred to some kind of problems over using sources. Maybe the most common "discrepancy" (between professional will and school reality) was presented by *Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse* who said that "images are pure 'excuses' for history exams, they are not true sources". In other words, the professional requirement of "reasoning with sources" heavily clashes with the necessity of using pupils' memory.

The international conference ended with a book launch of a 438-page-long volume edited by Nadine Fink, Marus Furrer and Peter Gautschi: *Why History Education?* (Frankfurt am Main, Wochenschau Verlag, 2023) which is a result of a cross-border cooperation of 31 experts in the field of history didactics, and contains many opportunities for further scientific research. The book is freely accessible online at DOI: 10.46499/1979.

The invited contributors and discussants of the event in Luzern were: Dr. Professor *Peter Gautschi* (Lucerne University of Teacher Education); Dr. Professor *Nadine Fink* (University of Teacher Education in Lausanne); Dr. Professor *Markus Furrer* (Lucerne University of Teacher Education); Dr. Professor *Karl P. Benziger* (Rhode Island College); Dr. Professor *Sylvain Doussot* (University of Nantes); Dr. Associate Professor *Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse* (Leuven University); Dr. Associate Professor *Katja Gorbahn* (Aarhus University); Dr. Associate Professor *Charles Adabo Oppong* (University of Cape Coast, Ghana); Dr. Associate Professor *Eugène Désiré Eloundou* (University of Yaoundé, Cameroon); Dr. Associate Professor *Michael Ndobegang Mbapndah* (University of Yaounde, Cameroon); Dr. Associate Professor *Barnabás Vajda* (J. Selye University); Dr. *Kaarel Haav* (Tartu University); Dr. *Terry Haydn* (University of East Anglia); Dr. *Jan Löfström* (University of Turku); *Anitha Oforiwah Adu-Boahen* (University of Education Winneba, Ghana); *Jasmine Steger* (PhD student at the Lucerne University).