

## **The new format of the final exam at colleges for higher vocational education**

Beginning with the school year 2015/16, all colleges for higher vocational education (*berufsbildende höhere Schulen* or BHS)\* in Austria will implement the new format of the matriculation and diploma exam (*Reife- und Diplomprüfung* or *Matura*). This new format is legally regulated in the 2010 Amendment to the School Education Act (*Schulunterrichtsgesetz*, Federal Law Gazette no. 52/2010) and in the 2015 Amendment to the Examination Regulation (*Prüfungsordnung*, Federal Law Gazette II no. 160/2015).

Essentially, the new format is determined by three aspects: the exam is now largely standardised and conducted centrally. Additionally, it is competence-oriented. Another major new feature is the introduction of a diploma thesis that is compulsory for all students who have to present and defend it before the exam committee.

### *Standardised and centralised*

In the past, all the written exam parts of the matriculation and diploma exam were drawn up by the teachers at the respective school site and approved by the school supervision. The new matriculation and diploma exam consists of standardised written exam parts in the language of instruction (most often German, but also Slovene, Croatian and Hungarian), in applied mathematics and in a foreign language (English, French, Italian or Spanish). The compilation of these exams as well as the duration and time of their implementation are laid down centrally for the whole of Austria. The exams are compiled by the Federal Institute of Educational Research, Innovation and Development of the Austrian School Sector ([bifie](#)) on behalf of the Ministry of Education. The ministry specifies the examination days and the duration of the exam uniformly for the whole of Austria by way of an ordinance. The teachers at the school sites correct and assess the examination papers based on centrally specified correction and assessment instructions. For the overall assessment, teachers have to give a numeral assessment suggestion and justify it also in verbal form.

As well as the standardised exams there are also non-standardised and not centrally conducted written exam parts, which in particular aim to take account of location-specific educational focuses. As before, these exams are drawn up by the subject teachers at the school location and are approved by the school supervision. In addition, like in the past, there is an oral exam section, for which, likewise, the respective subject teacher is responsible.

A major goal of this (partial) standardisation of the matriculation and diploma exam is quality improvement and assurance of BHS. The uniformly defined exams and assessment criteria mainly aim to ensure the objectivity and reliability of the exam results and promote the exam's transparency and comparability.

### *Competence-oriented*

The new matriculation and diploma exam is additionally competence-oriented. The exam assignments cover the basic competences which are also laid down in the curricula of the exam subjects. Here, competences are understood as the knowledge and skills that are available to learners with lasting effect in the long term and which enable them to transfer what they have learned to related contexts. The exam assignments are therefore primarily formulated with application- and problem solving-orientation and require more from the candidates than merely reproducing knowledge.

## Diploma thesis

As part of the new matriculation and diploma exam, all BHS students are obliged to draw up a diploma thesis. It is a written work prepared in a team of two to five learners, of a defined length (up to 80 pages, excluding annexes and data sheets) and which must meet relevant quality criteria. The diploma thesis has to be handed in before the start of the actual exam and then presented and discussed as part of it. The topic of the diploma thesis is specified in agreement with the supervising teacher at the school location and the team of students by the end of the fourth BHS year, after which it needs to be approved by the respective regional education board. The thesis is drawn up by the students outside classes, but with support provided in the corresponding school subjects throughout the final school year (such as regarding process and project management).

With their diploma thesis, students are to furnish proof of their competence in project- and practice-oriented work methods and demonstrate their ability to observe fundamental academic standards (quotation rules, sources, research methods, etc.). These competence objectives are also in line with the double qualification provided by BHS: direct labour market entry and access to higher education programmes.

### More information (German only):

Education Ministry: [https://www.bmbf.gv.at/schulen/unterricht/ba/reifepruefung\\_bhs.html](https://www.bmbf.gv.at/schulen/unterricht/ba/reifepruefung_bhs.html) (25.4.2016)

bifie: <https://www.bifie.at/srdp> (25.4.2016)

BHS diploma thesis: <http://www.bhs-diplomarbeit.at/> (25.4.2016)

VET schools: <http://www.diplomarbeiten-bbs.at/> (25.4.2016)

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\* As well as the dual training system (apprenticeship) and schools for intermediate vocational education (BMS), the five-year BHS is the third vocational pathway at the upper secondary level. Successful completion of BHS (that is of the matriculation and diploma exam) provides direct entry to the labour market (for higher-level activities) and access to all higher education programmes (i.e. studies at universities including universities of applied sciences or *Fachhochschulen*). In ISCED-2011, the first three years of this school form are classified at Level 3, the final two years at Level 5. To date, the final BHS qualification has not yet been allocated to the Austrian National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Expert discussions held before the establishment of the NQF, however, show a clear preference for Level 5, which also corresponds to Level 5 of the EQF.