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Strategies for reform and innovation in Hungarian public education

The Current Framework

In the last few years there were considerable changes in the **legal provisions of education**. In 1999, 2002 and 2003 there were significant Amendments of the Public Education Act of 1993. Furthermore, various newly established Acts had direct effects on the system of public education: regulations on the textbook market; on adult training; on the payment of compulsory vocational training contribution and on the development of the training system. Additionally, there was an Amendment to the Public Employee Act, regulating the employment of teachers.

The basic characteristics of the administration of the Hungarian system of public education, which evolved during the early nineties, can be summarized in the following: 1) the **administration of public education** is highly decentralized and the responsibilities are shared between several actors; 2) horizontally, the responsibility at the national level is shared by Ministry of Education, which assumes the direct responsibility for educational matters, and certain other Ministries – vertically, the responsibility is shared between the central (national), the regional, the local, and institutional levels.

As to the **structure of school system** and the progression of students, in Hungary, like in developed societies, a longer basic education phase is followed by a fairly differentiated upper secondary education and training phase offering schooling to various needs of customers. One of the most important developments of the nineties was that the secondary school-leaving exam was taken on large scale and a rapid expansion of higher education began.

In Hungary, the dual level **curriculum regulation** was developed in the middle of the 1990s. The regulation at central level has two components: the *National Core Curriculum* (NCC) published by the government in 1995 and the *frame-curricula* issued by the Minister of Education in 2000. On the local level, the regulation consists of *the local educational programme of schools* and the *local curricula*. Schools developed their NCC-compatible local curricula between 1995 and 1998. These had to be adjusted to the frame curricula by September 2001. Following the change of government in 2002, the new Minister of Education ordered for the review of the NCC, and consequently the NCC as well as the local curricula were modified. Teaching staffs are authorized to make key decisions at school level concerning the content of education from the selection of textbooks through the organization of the cultural domains into actual school subjects as well as developing the plan of school educational programme (the latter requires the approval of the maintainer).

Main Problems and Challenges

Efficiency

One of the greatest challenges for the Hungarian public education system is the permanent and large-scale decrease in the number of children, which has been a noticeable factor since the late 1990s. This has led to the deterioration of the optimal use of school space, causing problems of size efficiency and inevitably forcing school maintainers to introduce measures of rationalization. School maintainers are in fact forced to find a swift solution to all these problems, since the increase in the costs of education – due to pay raises, and the need to improve infrastructural conditions – leads to the **significant decrease in the cost efficiency of education**.

The number of students per class has dropped on all school levels, yet the local governments in smaller settlements are incapable of controlling the number of children in pre-schools or general schools. The local governments of larger cities operating an extensive network of institutions may find ways to achieve this objective, yet their efforts are limited by the operation of 6-, and 8-grade general secondary schools, which means that opportunities for merging of classes of 5–8th graders are limited, and the number of students in school classes remains rather low. The problems of cost-effectiveness in the Hungarian public education system therefore are intertwined with the fragmented network of institutions, determined by the layout of settlements.

Equity

The differentiation of institutions and programmes is already noticeable in lower cycles of education. This does not really broaden the available range of programmes, but rather **increases the selectivity of the system**. Generally speaking, the institutional programmes do not follow a modular structure; therefore low-achievers may drop out of the system without getting educational attainment or a professional qualification worthy on the labour market.

In Hungary, student performance is strongly influenced by the cultural capital of families. In the selective Hungarian education system social inequalities are reflected in the path of progression as well as in access to the different levels and programmes of education. The range of local educational institutions accurately mirrors the social structure of the communities. According to various researches, if there are sizeable differences in educational attainment and income in the local community the range of local institutions tends to be characterized by selectivity, the frequent use of entrance exams, and by various forms of segregation. Such differences are noticeable in the access to different educational programmes, and in the access to high quality educational services.

Quality and effectiveness

In the PISA 2000 survey, performance of the 15-year-old Hungarian students on the combined reading literacy scale was ranked 22nd. The average performance of the Hungarian students was 480 points, which is significantly lower than the 500-point international average. 48% of Hungarian students performed below the third proficiency level, which means that nearly half of them failed to reach the level of reading comprehension necessary for successfully entering the labour market. National analysis of the PISA survey found that the performance of urban learners is on the average 8-9% higher than that of students in rural schools with the same marks. Such differences between urban and rural student performance have also been observed in the course of national monitor surveys. Although, based upon the PIRLS survey, the Hungarian students in the early phases of education exceed the international average, this advantage seems to be fading away in the upper grades, which may be due to the highly selective system of secondary education.

Strategy, Priorities and Measures

A key objective of the European Union is to ensure the quality and improve the efficiency of education. In Hungary, this field has received particular political and professional attention since the middle of the 1990s. The issues concerning quality and efficiency are closely related to effectiveness, which primarily refers to the relation between financial expenditures and result. The outcome of education is a highly debated issue, for example should it be focused on the knowledge of students, improvement of their opportunities on the labour market, or the value of the social capital increased by education, etc. The notion of quality is also applied to the entirety of the institutional operation, which may be tied to efficiency in management and to organizational culture. The assessment instruments are gaining significance in the quality assurance and efficiency of such processes. Assessment is no longer focused on student performance. The assessment of quality and efficiency now involves a growing number of fields and activities, and there are increasing efforts in finding a link between the process of assessment and school development, educational management and planning. **Educational policy in Hungary must deal with the hot issue of cost-effectiveness in the overall dimensions of quality, efficiency and equity.** This complex approach is reflected by the priorities of the Ministry of Education (see below):

The priorities of the Ministry of Education's mid-term strategy to develop public education

- Laying down the foundations for lifelong learning by developing key competencies
- Reducing the inequalities in education
- Improvement of the quality of education
- Support for development of the teaching profession
- The promotion of the use of ICT tools
- Improvement of the physical conditions of education
- Improvement of the cost-efficiency and management of public education

1) Laying down the foundations for lifelong learning by developing key competencies

To weaken the traditional division of fragmented system of subjects, the National Core Curriculum defined **cross-curricular themes**, such as communication culture, physical and mental health, environmental education, career orientation, all of which having place in the cultural domain. The NCC was submitted to supervision in 2003 and as a consequence the regulation has been slightly changed from 2004. The new regulation underlines development as the most essential task of education, so the significance of factual or encyclopaedical knowledge has decreased.

2) Reducing the inequalities in education

One of the highest priorities of the Hungarian educational policy is to reduce inequalities, the gap between schools. The 2003 Amendment to the Public Education Act aims at repressing early selection and segregation in schools. In order to achieve this goal, pupils in the first three grades can only be commanded to repeat the school-year if they fail due to frequent absence from school. By the strength of the law pupils in the first three grades should not be given marks but a **written appraisal**. To make schools less homogeneous and to create an advantageous mix effect in the classes, from 2003 schools can get **earmarked money (supply for integration)** if they create a favourable environment for Roma children, i.e. classes are not homogeneous but mixed, consisting of either Roma and non-Roma children.

Several important programmes were launched in the last few years concerning the reduction of inequalities. The '**János Arany Development Programme**' of the Ministry of Education for gifted students aims to facilitate the educational progression and provision of gifted but socially disadvantaged students coming from settlements with a population below five thousand. The programme is not merely directed at expanding the access to education and at developing adequate educational practices and methods of their adaptation into local programmes, but also at continuously providing the professional and supplementary support indispensable for its successful implementation as well as the appropriate educational expertise and institutional background. Students participating in the programme receive study grants, while the institutions receive twice the amount of the normative per capita grant. The programme is concerned with the successful preparation of students for higher education studies.

The **Phare programme for the support of the social integration of disadvantaged youth** with particular emphasis on the Roma minority was launched in 1999. The programme aims at handling the problems of inequality disadvantaged students are faced with in a complex manner, using different methods and tools on the different levels of the educational system. As a continuation of the programme, a new project was launched in 2002, with the intention of establishing Roma community houses in smaller, disadvantaged settlements, where trained regional development experts will help overcome the local difficulties.

The Public Education Act and the **Equal Opportunities Act** established the legal framework for inclusive education. The implementation and enforcement of these laws, however, requires decades of development and investment. Between 1999 and 2002, the **National Public Foundation for the Remedial Education of Disabled Children and Students** has contributed to these objectives by providing a considerable amount of funds. Some noteworthy programmes supported by the Foundation include: training programmes for developing a supportive attitude for parents and day-care teachers; programmes facilitating early diagnosis and early development; improving the human and material resources of schools accommodating integrative educational programmes; support services such as the development of a network of special educational needs teachers at large; information exchange and the promotion of co-operation in the micro-regions; organizing integrated camps.

In 1999, the Budapest Public Foundation for the Development of Public Education launched the **Mentor Programme for the progression of Roma students**. The programme's aim was to help seventh and eighth-grader Roma students to continue their studies in secondary school. In achieving this goal, the individual mentors provide after-school lessons to a maximum of five students. As a reward, teachers receive a monthly grant for each of their students. The Foundation gives support according to the number of students taking part in extra-curricular activities, which may be used freely by the teachers.

The aim of the '**Roma Integration Programme**' of the Ec-Pec Foundation is to help disadvantaged Roma students achieve reasonable results in school. To achieve this goal, they have devised a special development programme, allowing students lagging behind in their studies due to their socio-economic disadvantages to provide a better performance in normal schooling conditions, regardless of whether they study in special school types or in the small-sized remedial education groups of normal school programmes. Roma teaching assistants support the work of teachers in the schools participating in the programme. The two-year pilot

phase of the programme has proved that at least half of all Roma students attending special schools are able to meet normal curricular requirements if they are given appropriate development and care.

3) Improvement of the quality of education

While educational policy-makers have strongly emphasized content development and curricular regulations in the past 15 years, the assessment of student performance and the evaluation of institutional operation only began in the last one or two years. The reform of the examination system in public education began in 1997, when the examination regulations for the basic examination and the **two-level secondary school-leaving examination** were published. Having undergone several amendments, these regulations will come into effect in 2008 and 2005, respectively. The development of the school-leaving examination has been an ongoing process for several years in Hungary. The requirements of the examination were reviewed and amended in 2003 together with the frame curricula, and, as a consequence, the level of requirements has been reduced and skills development has received a greater emphasis. In all exam subjects, there is two-level (elementary, advanced) specification of requirements. From 2005, the secondary school-leaving examination will replace entrance examinations at levels specified by the given higher education institution. The student himself will have the right to choose the level of the exam to be taken. Secondary schools will have to assure the chance for students to prepare for either of the exams, while all written exams will be uniform and centralised. The **assessment of exam** results will be based on **standardized** marking criteria. The intermediate level exam will remain school-based, while the advanced level exam will be organised externally.

One of the most important tools aiming at improving and developing quality and effectiveness of education is the **System of National Assessment of Competencies**, which measures the basic skills and knowledge of every pupil of certain grades. To fulfil these tasks a new institution, the **National Public Education Evaluation and Examination Centre** was established in 1999. With the implementation of the **new national diagnostic knowledge assessment test**, the Ministry of Education wishes to achieve two basic goals. Firstly, the idea that the content of the tests and methods of the evaluation used in the assessments convince schools to react to the need for new content development. Secondly, they intend to develop the culture of assessment and its methodological background at the institutional level. Although the assessments naturally yield findings used to evaluate schools and the system of education, these were not intended for external institutional assessment. The aim of the survey was to improve and disseminate the assessment culture, to create a database and establish a method with which self-images become comparable with real images, to make the educational added value measurable and to diagnose student performance and related developments. Based on experiences with tests used in international surveys, a series of up-to-date questionnaires have been developed for these assessments, which were conducted in the first, fifth and ninth grades.

Another significant measure taken in the field of quality and efficiency development and evaluation has been the establishment of the **Comenius 2000 quality improvement programme**. The programme was introduced after the 1999 Amendment of the Public Education Act, following several years of professional preparation. The Comenius 2000 quality improvement programme for public education included 3 models both on the level of institutions and maintainers, however, only two institutional models were piloted and implemented. *Comenius I* is an institutional model aimed at the creation of a *partnership*

focused operational method. To achieve this, the institution drafted an overview of its situation, identified its stakeholders, and then examined their needs and degree of satisfaction. The results had to be contrasted with the internal and external institutional self-image, developed in the course of open self-evaluation, whilst taking into account the objectives of the particular educational programme. The result of the analysis served as a point of departure for the specification of objectives and priorities. The institution either modified earlier objectives, or specified new objectives, stating the priorities in the establishment of these short, medium and long term objectives, which were to be made public after their adoption. The written summary of the steps leading to the achievement of these objectives constituted the action plan itself, which included the available resources, the statement of responsibilities, the proposal of a time schedule, the expected results and the methods of their assessment and evaluation. The implementation of the model was concluded by a so-called guided self-evaluation, during which the institution had to present its activities based on facts, to evaluate the applied methods and the achieved results as fully as possible, to specify strengths and weaknesses, as well as to plan necessary interventions. The *Comenius II* model, entitled *'Implementation of total quality management* is based on the above-mentioned self-evaluation. After the 2002 general elections, the Ministry of Education initiated the review of the Comenius programme. The new administration recommends the programme only as an optional quality assurance model for institutions. However, in order to ensure the dissemination of the practice of quality assurance, a law was passed obliging all public education institutions to build their own quality improvement system and to define these in an individual document approved by the maintainer.

4) Support for development of the teaching profession

Due to low salaries in the field of education, teachers were losing prestige in the past decade. In international comparison, in 2002 the salaries of Hungarian teachers were far below the OECD average. In recent years, educational policy makers in Hungary took major steps to increase teacher salaries. In 2002, there was a **50% pay rise to all public employees**, aimed at improving the reward of teachers.

In the late 1990s, a new, **coherent form of in-service training** emerged. Aside from passing necessary regulations and developing a financial scheme, an institution responsible for providing professional support was established (Methodology and Information Centre for In-service Teacher Training – PTMIK), along with a professional body responsible for quality assurance (Accreditation Board of In-Service Training). The educational administration became responsible for the continuous monitoring of the system of in-service teacher training required by law. The introduction of new in-service training system created a supply market. Higher education institutions and educational service-providers offer almost 60% of all properly licensed and accredited in-service training programmes.

5) The promotion of the use of ICT tools

In Hungary, the development of basic IT skills is a top priority, in order to facilitate the progression of students in the information society, their entry the labour market, and to make them able to participate in lifelong learning. In 2002, The Minister of Education revealed the government's **educational ICT strategy, entitled Schoolnetwork Express (Sulinet Expressz)**. The main objectives of the strategy are the following: providing internet access for all schools by 2005; achieving better computer per student rates (1 computer for every 5 secondary, and every 10 general school student); the initiation of ICT education in the 5th

grade; allowing for the computer skills examination (ECDL) to be free of charge for final grade students of secondary schools and teachers; and the promotion of digital content and curriculum development. The **PHARE-funded E-learning (Internet-based education) programme** also serves this latter goal. The programme consists of tenders for general schools requesting the transformation of existing teaching content into e-learning materials, or the adaptation of educational software for use over the Internet etc. The government has taken further measures to narrow the information gap between different social classes. Customs fees for IT equipment have been reduced and households with school-aged children may apply for an annual HUF 60-thousand (approximately 250 euro) tax benefit when purchasing computer equipment from 2003. In spite of these efforts, no successful solutions have been introduced to provide for cheap access to the Internet.

6) Improvement of the physical conditions of education

The buildings used for education in Hungary are extremely heterogeneous. As a result of the demographic decline, there were hardly any public educational institutions constructed at the millennium. Most of the buildings require renovation, 40% of these were built before World War II, another 42% between 1946 and 1979. Barely more than half of the nearly 14 thousand buildings used in public education are in a hardly satisfactory technical condition. Due to the decreasing amounts of capital expenditure, 9.2% of pre-school and school buildings require urgent renovation, while 40% require modernization in the near future. The most immediate task, apart from the renovation and preservation of school buildings, is the construction of the premises specified in the Ministerial decree on the compulsory teaching aids and equipment of educational institutions required by all pre-schools and schools. According to research, there is a lack of the necessary premises in nearly two-thirds of the institutions. When the Ministry of Education recognised the impossibility presented by the deadline of 1 September 2003, a certain group of institutions were given an extension until 2008 for conducting major financial investments. Based on the results of the PEB programme of the OECD, the Ministry announced **a large-scale loan programme for the reconstruction of school buildings** and modernization entitled Schools of the 21st century. Simultaneously, the EU funded PHARE programme entitled Information technology in general schools was launched with a HUF 6.5 billion budget. The framework of the programme allows for the renovation of approximately one hundred educational buildings.

7) Improvement of the cost-efficiency and management of public education

Local governments maintaining educational institution(s) are required to develop a **local action plan** to give support to decision-making and scheduling of tasks. The central administration aims at **harmonising local and regional planning** by requiring local governments to take into consideration the county-level action plan. The local plan must elaborate on (1) the performance of obligatory tasks; (2) the range of non-obligatory tasks; and (3) the outlines of the operation, maintenance, development and reorganization of the institutional system. The implementation of the plan is to be evaluated and, if necessary, reviewed on a two-year basis.

Local governments most often use the method of school self-evaluation in both general and secondary schools. These are essentially based on the institution's report, while subject tests are used less frequently. In both school types approximately one-third of the local governments used evaluations based on parental satisfaction with the school. The 2003 Amendment to the Public Education Act may bring about considerable change in the process

of school evaluation, as it requires maintainers to assess the management of public educational institutions and their educational success as well as the effectiveness of their operation and the compliance with regulations at least once in every four years.

Since 2002, **institutional (school level) planning** consists of three main elements: (1) the school educational programme regarded as a strategic plan, which specifies medium term tasks and objectives, covering at least one educational cycle; (2) the operative plan, consisting of the annual work schedule, which essentially formulates the relevant goals and tasks for the given academic year and the institutional action plan; and (3) the quality assurance workplan, determining the quality improvement tasks of the institution. It is a normal expectation and it is also legally regulated that these plans **are to be harmonized with the action plan of the maintainer**. The approval of the local government's action plan is scheduled one year before the modification of the school educational programme, therefore the institutions have had an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the content of the former.

A fund to encourage the demand for educational counselling services was set up in 1999 by the central administration. It allows local governments to apply for counselling services that improve and expand their educational competencies. Local governments with the professional capacity for the accommodation of these resources, and with the ability to utilise the results of the financed projects, were given preference in the allocation of grants. The availability of central fund failed to reduce the administrative disadvantages of local governments without the appropriate expertise since they often had no idea about what services to order and which areas required such support.

Opportunities provided by the accession to the European Union

In order to have access to European Union funds Hungary has been obliged to prepare a National Development Plan (NDP), which sets the framework for the utilization of Structural Funds assistance. A total of five so-called operational programmes (OPs) have been adopted and various elements of public education appear in at least two of them, in the Human Resources Development OP the Regional Development OP). Based on a comprehensive analysis of the economic and social situation of the country, the NDP has identified the objectives and priorities to be supported by the Structural Funds in the period 2004-2006. One of the main objectives of the Human Resources Development Operational Programme is to strengthen the links between education and the economy, in order to provide for all the opportunity of obtaining competitive knowledge and skills. Several ad hoc and standing committees were set up consisting of experts from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour to find the most efficient and effective way of fulfilling these goals.

The priorities **“Fight against social exclusion by promoting access to the labour market”**, **“Promoting lifelong learning and adaptability”** and **“Improving the infrastructure of education, social services and the health care system”** all contain a series of education related measures. The measures endeavour

- to ensure equal opportunities within the education system for disadvantaged pupils;
- to promote the development of skills necessary for lifelong learning;
- to develop the vocational training system to make it more flexible and responsive to labour market needs;
- to promote the adaptation of higher education to the requirements of the knowledge-based society;
- to reduce inequalities in the access to proper quality education through the development of the physical infrastructure of elementary and pre-school educational institutions in disadvantaged areas;
- to support the upgrading of the physical infrastructure of educational institutions with a focus on secondary and higher education institutions.

Fight against social exclusion by promoting access to the labour market: The priority supports actions aimed at improving the employment opportunities of disadvantaged people and developing 'pathways' towards the labour market. Target groups include, among others, the Roma people, the long-term unemployed, the disabled, early school leavers, people with low levels of education and skills, drug addicts and those living in the most disadvantaged regions. Measures are based on a comprehensive approach involving a range of activities in the field of education and training, employment and social support services. Across the priority as a whole, special emphasis is given to improving the employability of Roma people, who face significant disadvantages in accessing the labour market.

Promoting lifelong learning and adaptability: The priority covers several different levels and forms of education and training, including pre-primary, primary and secondary education, vocational training, post-secondary education and higher education, as well as adult training. It supports the following fields and activities: creating an appropriate methodological and pedagogical basis for the development of basic skills and competencies, improving the system of vocational training so that it better responds to the needs of the economy, facilitating the adaptation of higher education to the requirements of the knowledge-based society and the

changing demands of the economy, promoting adult training including, among others, in-company training and the development of entrepreneurial skills.

Improving the infrastructure of education, social services and the health care system:

Supported by the European Regional Development Fund, this priority promotes investments in the infrastructure related to human resources development. Interventions are aimed at reducing regional disparities in the quality of education, social and health care and promoting equal access to these services. Investment in infrastructure targeted to underpin European Social Fund (ESF) supported activities contribute significantly to the achievement of the programme objectives.

Hungary joined the European Union on 1st May, 2004, barely over one month ago. The overall impact of EU funds available in the next 3 years on the national economy as a whole will be about 1.5 to 2 per cent of GDP per annum, and a total of about 100 thousand new jobs can be created in this period if Hungary can fully utilise the funds made available. Public education is only a small but potentially important part of these funds and apparently all “players” in Hungarian public education policy, including policy makers, regional and local governments, regional and local school maintainers, planners are aware of their potential importance. The successful realisation of the programme in the next 3 years is yet more important for Hungary because it can lay the solid foundations of a more rapid progress in the field of public education during the next seven-year planning and budget period (between 2007 and 2013) of the enlarged European Union.

Medium-term strategy for development of public education

Periodically the Ministry of Education sets up a committee consisting of experts from several fields to prepare the so-called medium-term strategy for development of public education. The measures taken by the Ministry are based on the strategy and the analysis behind that.

Report on Education in Hungary

A comprehensive report on school education is published in every third year by the National Institute of Public Education on the request of the Ministry of Education. The first one was published in 1996, following the review of Hungarian education policy by the OECD. The idea of producing a comprehensive analysis of the development of education at regular intervals was originally motivated by the impact of this review process on education policy debates in Hungary. The aim was to contribute to the enlightenment of public debates and to develop the knowledge basis of education policy by the help of an analytical public report based on statistical data and research result on the state of education. The publications have proved that the availability of a thorough and regular professional analysis may have favourable influence on the public discourse on education. These reports have certainly contributed to the predictability, rationality and quality of the education policy process. It is widely used in public administration and teacher training, as well.

Centre for Educational Policy Analysis

The Ministry of Education under the auspices of its think-tank (National Institute of Public Education) has established a centre for making policy analysis on several vital issues. The

centre has been functioning for one and a half years and has already published various papers on the following themes: content regulation of education, efficiency of education, life-long learning in Hungary, equity in school education, etc. The papers are written by selected experts and their recommendations are discussed in the form of an 'Edupol-Cafe', where representatives of politics, public administration, schools and research take part.

Committee for developing indicators in the field of education

In 2004 the 'Indicator committee' was set up by the Ministry of Education to strengthen the analytic tools of making educational policy. The work of this committee is based upon the work made for the OECD networks, but its members are not only from the Ministry, so it is a good way to nourish fruitful cooperation between researchers, statisticians and decision makers.

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