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Life Pathways of Repeatedly Unsuccessful Secondary School Examinees

Final research report

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Output of the project

Life pathways of unsuccessful graduates
CZ.02.3.68/0.0/0.0/19_076/0016377



EUROPEAN UNION
European Structural and Investment Funds
Operational Programme Research,
Development and Education



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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE RESULTS

I.

The school results of repeatedly unsuccessful examinees do not reflect their readiness for the Matura examination.

II.

The current practice of adding more time for students with special needs is not considered to be sufficient.

III.

Some teachers in Matura subjects discourage students from attempting the exam itself, or they influence the choice between subjects.

IV.

Insufficient information from the school about the exam and teachers' problematic initiatives during the exam are barriers to success.

V.

Support for unsuccessful examinees should not be limited to preparation for the Matura examination; it should also take place between individual attempts.

VI.

The life stories of unsuccessful examinees are characterised by a consistent effort to transform failure at the Matura examination into success in life.

VII.

The loss of institutional support and student status leads to students adopting new roles that distance unsuccessful examinees from success in the exam.

1

INTRODUCTION



The “Life Pathways of Unsuccessful Graduates” research project was a response to a call within the Innovations in Pedagogy framework that was introduced by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. The call highlighted the lack of knowledge about students who fail the Matura examination and their subsequent lives. The research looked at a subset of unsuccessful examinees for whom failure in the Matura examination represented a barrier to further educational or professional careers. It did not investigate examinees who succeeded in the Matura examination at the latest on the first remedial term. It also did not investigate examinees who took the Matura examination in the regular term and failed in any part of the Matura examination, but who, after registering for the closest remedial term and after successful remedy, or after submitting a request for a review of the Matura examination and its results and its positive processing, were able to continue their studies at university or enter the labour market.

Since 2011, when the common part of the Matura examination was introduced, the failure rate for both the common and profile parts of the Matura examination has been gradually increasing, with some fluctuations. The gross failure rate (i.e. the number of those who failed or did not take the exam / the number of registered examinees) was 34.2% in 2019 (29.8% in 2020 and 22.7% in 2021¹); the net failure rate (i.e. the number of those who failed the exam / the number of those taking the exam) was 26.9% (27.4% in 2020 and 18.4% in 2021). The gross and net failure rates have increased each year (except in 2013 and 2021, when changes were made to the Matura examinations, and for the gross failure rate also with the exception of 2018, 2020, and 2021) (CERMAT, n.d.-b). The Centre for the Measurement of Educational Outcomes (CERMAT) tracks the potential and actual failure rates, yet it is difficult to infer the numbers of unsuccessful examinees who have already resigned or still intend to attempt the exam. What is missing is a deeper analysis of what leads some young people to return to education, even with the passage of time, while others do not. The subsequent lives and educational trajectories of unsuccessful examinees are unexplored phenomena. The problem appears most serious for the subgroup of unsuccessful examinees whose educational trajectories result in ultimate failure in the Matura examination. They are left with only a basic education and cannot continue in tertiary education; their entry into the labour market is also problematised. This situation can give rise to a group of economically inactive individuals who are not employed nor in education or training (“NEETs”).

¹ In 2021, significant changes were made in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.1 Research methodology

1.1.1 Aims and research questions

The main objectives of the project were to gain in-depth insights into the insufficiently researched phenomenon of failure in the Matura examination and its consequences for the future life pathways of the students concerned and to formulate evidence-based recommendations for education policies. The objects of the investigation were the reasons for failure in the Matura examination itself, i.e. what led to the failure, and the further life pathways of unsuccessful examinees, especially with regard to the educational path over a period of two years. In drafting the research intent, the main research question was formulated as follows: How do psychosocial stress and social exclusion in institutional settings affect the subsequent life and educational trajectory of unsuccessful secondary school examinees over the two-year period following the experience of failure? In the logic of qualitative research, this question was continuously critically reassessed based on the data and transformed into sub-questions and specific questions were refined.

SVO 1

What predictors signal future failure at the Matura examination?

SVO 2

How do unsuccessful examinees perceive equity in the setting of the Matura examination?

SVO 3

From the perspective of the examinees, what barriers to success in the Matura examination emerge in the time between remedial attempts?

SVO 4

What are the relationships among the narrative identities of unsuccessful examinees?

SVO 5

What do unsuccessful examinees learn from overcoming their failure?

SVO 6

What are the future career and educational paths of unsuccessful examinees?

SVO 7

What are the life stories of unsuccessful examinees?

The research was conducted through qualitative inquiry and the chosen research design was a combination of a multiple case study and a biographical design (life history) with regard to the research objective and research questions. In the combination of the two designs, it is possible to talk about a specific research design of case history (Thomson, 2007), which is mainly used in longitudinal studies. Since it involved following informants and the development of their life histories over time, albeit only two years, the research can also be described as a quasi-longitudinal investigation.

The research started in January 2020. As the call specifications required a two-year follow-up of informants, this period corresponded to the 2018 cohort for retrospective research, the 2020 cohort for prospective research, and the 2019 cohort for a combination of the two. The baseline plan was to include a minimum of 10 informants from each of the 2018, 2019, and 2020 cohorts examined. As the 2019 and 2020 cohorts included multiple interviews, the initial sample was tentatively set at 20 informants to compensate for the potential loss of informants from the sample. Table 1 shows the total numbers of informants within each cohort and their other characteristics. The available statistical data show that the exam failure rate of the examinees varied significantly among types of secondary schools, among regions of the Czech Republic, and also among individual groups of fields. In the overall sample, the researchers tried to have as equal a representation of men and women as possible, given the horizontal principles of the call, and to distribute the sample across three regions of the Czech Republic. In addition, it was desirable that all types of secondary schools and groups of fields with the Matura examination were represented. Logically, it was assumed that there would be a higher number of examinees from secondary technical schools, given their representation in secondary education and the higher failure rate in the Matura examination.

Potential respondents were continuously and repeatedly approached through job portals and social networks. The advertisement included a contact form through which they could sign up for the research; they were then contacted by a member of the research team. Potential respondents were motivated by a reward for the interview. Despite this, the researchers faced difficulties with the sample design and the reluctance of informants to participate in the research. One possible explanation for this may be that failure at the Matura examination is an unpleasant experience and not everyone is willing to relive it by talking about it. These difficulties were exacerbated by the pandemic situation that prevailed for much of the data collection period, which greatly reduced opportunities for personal contact with informants. In this complicated situation, the research team decided to pay at least a token remuneration to the informants. Dropouts from the sample were already occurring at the time of contact, as informants signed up for the research and filled out the initial questionnaire, but then some stopped communicating. In addition to signing a work agreement, involved informants also gave informed consent after being given detailed information about the research and the option to withdraw from the research at any stage. The incentive pay was paid per interview conducted; it was also intended to serve to retain the informants in the long-term research. Nevertheless, some informants were no longer interested in conducting follow-up interviews, so only one interview was conducted with them, and the sample had to be continuously replenished. The final sample is shown in Table 1. In individual cases, it was possible to re-establish contact with the informant after one missed interview. In that case, questions from the previous interview were inserted into the follow-up interview. The data corpus available for analysis contains 111 interviews with a total of 52 informants. The average interview length was 1 hr 45 min. The numbers of interviews conducted with informants from different cohorts are summarised in Table 2.

TABLE 1: Sample characteristics

Year	N	JMK	MSK	Prague	Men	Women	Sec. Tech. School	Sec. General School	Follow-up education
2018	11	8	2	1	4	7	9	2	0
2019	17	9	0	8	4	13	13	2	2
2020	22	6	10	6	12	10	14	2	6
2021	2	1	1	0	1	1	2	0	0
Total	52	24	13	15	21	31	38	6	8

TABLE 2: Number of interviews conducted with informants from each cohort

	1 interview	2 interviews	3 interviews	4 interviews	Total informants
2018	10	1			11
2019	3	5	9		17
2020	5	7	2	8	22
2021	2				2

Informants were assigned pseudonyms according to their cohort affiliation: 2018 – names beginning with the letter A (Table 3), 2019 with the letter B (Table 4), 2020 with the letter D (Table 5) and 2021 with the letter E (Table 6). The tables always indicate in which part the examinees were unsuccessful (ST =standardised test; OP=oral part; EP=essay paper; ProfileP=profile part) and also which region they come from (JMK=South Moravian Region; MSK=Moravian-Silesian Region). The family background of the respondents was an important factor for exploring their life pathways. The mother’s highest educational attainment was most often secondary school with the Matura examination (see Figure 2) and the father’s was secondary school with a VET certificate (see Figure 3).

TABLE 3: Cohort 2018

Pseudonym of the informant	Region	Type of school studied	First attempt: Spring 2018	Attempt: Autumn 2018	The second remedial attempt was:
Adam	South Moravian	Secondary general school	Mathematics ST	Mathematics ST	Unsuccessful
Adéla	South Moravian	Lyceum	Mathematics ST	Mathematics ST	Unsuccessful
Agáta	Prague	Secondary vocational school	Czech: ST, OP; English: ST	Czech language: ST	Unsuccessful
Alena	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	English: EP, ProfileP	ProfileP	Successful
Alex	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	ProfileP	ProfileP	Successful
Alice	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	Mathematics ST; Czech: EP, OP	Mathematics ST; Czech: OP	Successful
Amálie	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	Mathematics ST; Czech: ST, OP	Mathematics ST	Unsuccessful
Aneta	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	German: ST, ProfileP	German: ST	Successful
Arnold	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	English: ST	English: ST	Successful
Arnošt	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	Mathematics ST; Czech: EP	Mathematics ST, Czech: EP	Successful
Astra	South Moravian	Secondary general school	Mathematics ST	Mathematics ST	Successful

TABLE 4 Cohort 2019

Pseudonym of the informant	Region	Type of school studied	First attempt: Spring 2019	Attempt: Autumn 2019	The second remedial attempt was:
Bára	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	Mathematics ST	Mathematics ST	Unsuccessful
Bartoloměj	Prague	Secondary vocational school	Czech: EP	Czech: ST, EP, ProfileP	Successful
Beáta	Prague	Secondary general school	She did not participate	ProfileP	Successful
Běla	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	Not permitted to take the full Matura examination	Not registered for the full Matura examination	Successful
Benjamín	South Moravian	Secondary general school	Mathematics: ST	Mathematics: ST	Unsuccessful
Berenika	Prague	Secondary vocational school	Czech language: ST	Czech language: ST	Successful
Bětko	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	ProfileP	ProfileP	Successful
Bibiana	South Moravian	Follow-up education completed by the Matura examination	Mathematics ST; Czech: ST	Mathematics ST; Czech: ST	Unsuccessful
Blanka	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	Czech: ST	Czech: ST	Unsuccessful
Bohumil	Prague	Secondary vocational school	He did not participate	Czech: OP; English: OP	Successful
Bohuslava	Prague	Secondary vocational school	Czech: OP	Czech: OP	Successful
Bořek	Prague	Secondary vocational school	Czech: EP; English: EP; ProfileP	Czech: EP; English: EP; ProfileP	Unsuccessful
Božena	Prague	Secondary vocational school	Czech ST	Czech: ST	Unsuccessful
Brenda	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	Czech: ST	Czech: ST	Unsuccessful
Brigita	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	Mathematics ST	Mathematics ST	Unsuccessful
Bronislava	South Moravian	Lyceum	Mathematics ST; Czech: ST; ProfileP	Mathematics ST	Unsuccessful
Břetislava	Prague	Follow-up education completed by the Matura examination	Czech: ST, EP; English: ST, EP	Czech: ST, EP; English: ST, EP	Unsuccessful

TABLE 5 Cohort 2020

Pseudo-nym of the informant	Region	Type of school studied	First attempt: Spring 2020	Attempt: Autumn 2020	The second remedial attempt was:
Dalibor	South Moravian	Secondary general school	Czech: ST	Czech: ST	Successful
Dalimil	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	ProfileP	ProfileP	Successful
Damián	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	Mathematics ST; ProfileP	Mathematics ST	Unsuccessful
Dan	Prague	Secondary vocational school	Czech: ST	Czech: ST	Undetermined
Dana	Moravian-Silesian	Follow-up education completed by the Matura examination	Czech: ST; English: ST	Czech: ST; English: ST	Unsuccessful
Daniel	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	He did not attend	Czech: OP; English: OP; ProfileP	Successful
Daniela	Prague	Secondary vocational school	Czech: ST, OP; ProfileP	Czech: ST	Successful
Dante	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	Mathematics ST	Mathematics ST	Unsuccessful
Danuše	Prague	Follow-up education completed by the Matura examination	Czech: ST	Czech: ST	Successful
Dara	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	ProfileP	ProfileP	Successful
Darek	Prague	Secondary vocational school	ProfileP	ProfileP	Undetermined
Darina	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	Czech: ST	Czech: ST	Undetermined
David	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	Czech: ST	Czech: ST	Undetermined
Denis	Prague	Follow-up education completed by the Matura examination	Czech: ST	Czech: ST	Successful
Denisa	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	Mathematics ST; Czech: ST	Mathematics ST	Unsuccessful
Dita	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	Czech: OP	Czech: OP	Successful
Dominik	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	Czech: ST, OP; ProfileP	Czech: ST	Unsuccessful
Doubravka	South Moravian	Secondary general school	Mathematics ST	Mathematics ST	Unsuccessful
Drahomíra	South Moravian	Follow-up education completed by the Matura examination	English: ST, OP; ProfileP	English: ST, OP; ProfileP	Unsuccessful
Drahoslav	Moravian-Silesian	Secondary vocational school	ProfileP	ProfileP (did not attend)	Undetermined
Dulčinea	South Moravian	Secondary vocational school	Czech: ST; English: ST	Czech: ST; English: ST	Unsuccessful
Dušan	Prague	Follow-up education completed by the Matura examination	Czech: ST	Czech: ST	Undetermined

TABLE 6 Cohort 2021

Pseudo-nym of the informant	Region	Type of school studied	First attempt: Spring 2021	Attempt: Autumn 2021	The second remedial attempt was:
Eliška	Prague	Secondary vocational school	German: ST	German: ST	Successful
Elvis	Prague	Secondary vocational school	English: ST; ProfileP	English: ST; ProfileP	Successful

FIGURE 1: Success rate in the third Matura examination attempt in our sample

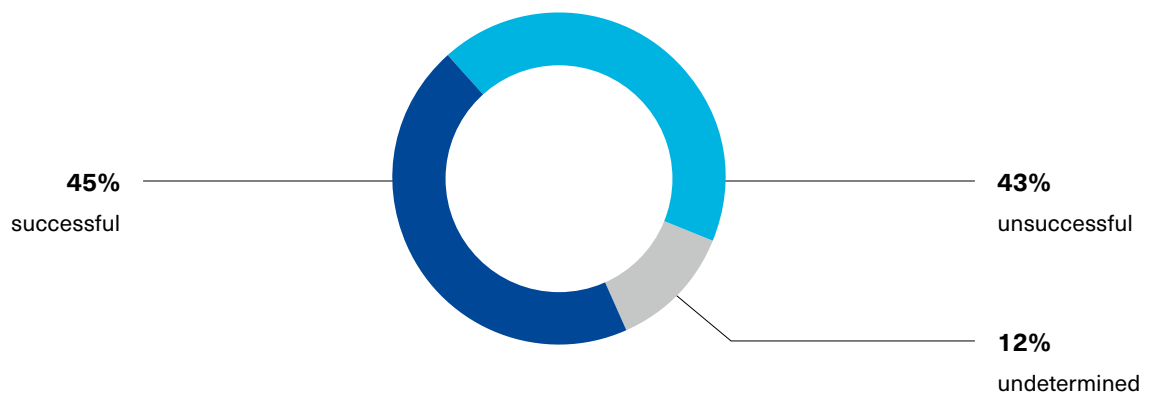


FIGURE 2: Family background: mother's highest attained education level

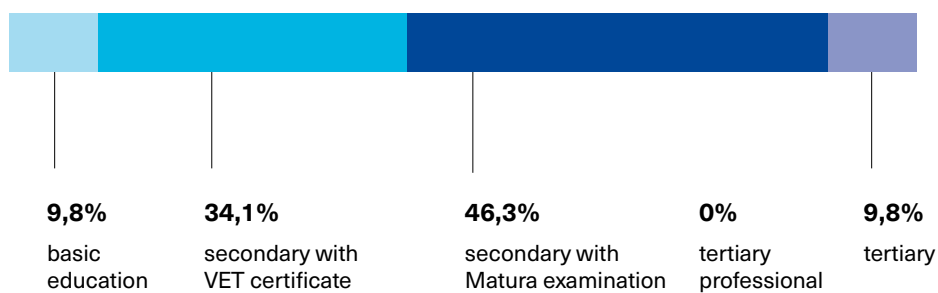
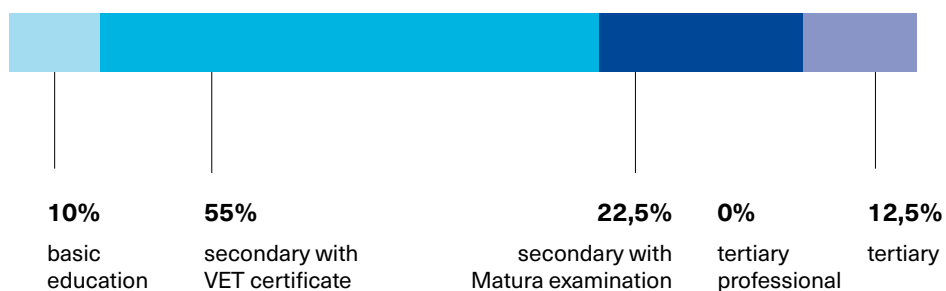


FIGURE 3: Family background: father's highest attained education level



1.1.2 Data collection

The data collection was conducted from January 2020 to November 2022 and was divided into a pilot study and main data collection. The first wave of data collection was based on a retrospective examination of the life pathways of students who had already failed the Matura examination in the period before the project started. This wave of data collection was conducted with a cohort of first-attempt examinees who had been unsuccessful in 2018. Thus, it was possible to examine their subsequent life paths over a two-year period retrospectively in a single interview at the very beginning of the research investigation. This allowed piloting of the research instrument and better targeting of further investigation. This procedure also aimed to reduce the influence of intervening variables (e.g. partial changes in the Matura examination system, etc.), the risk of dropping informants from the sample in the case of a purely prospective investigation, and the risk of biasing the results through the hidden influence of the research investigation on the informants' nascent life trajectories. The intermediate stage between the pilot part and the main wave of data collection was the examinees who had been unsuccessful in 2019. For these informants, part of their path (the first year after unsuccessful Matura examination) was followed retrospectively, and the next year of the path was followed prospectively. Overall, for the 2019 cohort, ideally three interviews were conducted with each informant.

The main wave of data collection was based on a long-term follow-up of unsuccessful examinees who sat the exam in 2020. They were followed prospectively for a further two years after the unsuccessful Matura examination and were interviewed four times during the project period. The last cohort followed was the control group. These were informants who failed in 2021 and on whom the possible different development after the epidemiologically enforced partial changes in the design of the Matura examination in 2020 was to be verified, and if the Matura examination fully returned to its original form, this was also to further control for the influence of the intervening variables. Thus, the 2021 cohort was selected as a control one for the research, and the final number of informants in the cohort was determined by data saturation (if the data did not generate new findings, collection would be terminated). This was eventually confirmed; interviews with this last cohort did not differ from the findings of the previous cohorts, the data did not suggest new research directions, so data collection was terminated after the first two interviews were completed.

During data collection, information was extracted from respondents' statements and verified from available sources. For example, dates and results of examinations were verified by report cards, information about schools and fields of study, success rates of examinees, etc. were compared with information from school websites. No respondent had to be excluded from the research on the basis of giving false information.

The frequency of interviews and the interview period for each cohort are summarised in [Table 7](#). The schedule of interview periods had to be adjusted during implementation depending on the Covid-19 pandemic measures while maintaining the established frequency of interviews and the two-year follow-up of informants (at the last point, with the exception of the 2021 control cohort).

TABLE 7 Frequency and periods of interviews

	Spring 2020	Autumn 2020	Spring 2021	Autumn 2021	Spring to Autumn 2022
Cohort 2018	█				
Cohort 2019	█	█	█		
Cohort 2020		█	█	█	█
Cohort 2021				█	

1.1.3 Research instrument

For each of the series of interviews, a specific version of the research instrument – the biographical interview – was created. For the first 2018 cohort, a pilot validation of the research instrument was conducted, and the instrument was then adapted and used in the first interviews with informants. As these were biographical interviews exploring informants' life paths, the interview scheme was based on a biographical narrative approach. Thus, biographical narrative interviews were based on the biographical narrative interview method (BNIM; Kutsyuruba & Mendes, 2023), which was originally introduced and developed primarily by Schütze (1992) and Rosenthal (2004) and later developed by Wengraf (2001). The traditional BNIM has three parts (Burke, 2014). The interview scheme used in this study was in line with Rosenthal's (2004) conceptualisation: 1. an initial narrative assignment, 2. internal narrative questions based only on the informant's narrative response to the initial narrative assignment, 3. external narrative questions (pre-prepared questions, semi-structured interview type). The first interviews with each cohort and the interviews with the 2018 cohort, where one interview was conducted, were based on the following initial narrative assignment:

We are interested in everything that preceded your first attempt at the Matura examination, how you entered secondary school, how you recall your studies, how you prepared for the Matura examination, how your Matura examination went and what you did, when you found out the results, how you perceived it all, and also how your life went on. Everything you can remember is important to us and we would appreciate it if you could tell it as a coherent story in your own words.

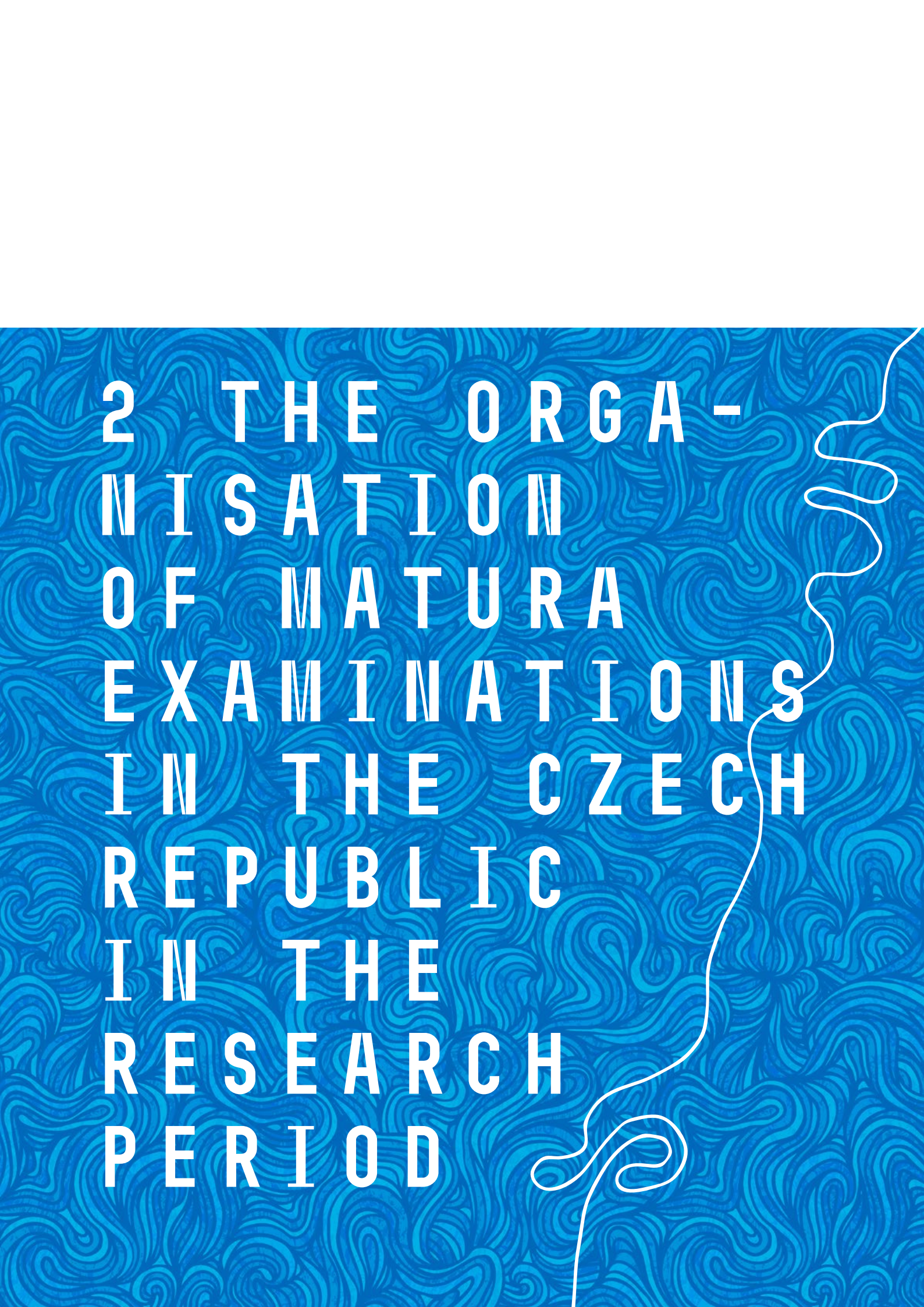
The follow-up interviews then followed the logic of the repeated attempts the informants had made over time and other events that had occurred in their lives since the last interview. The initial narrative assignment was then transformed in the following way:

We are interested in everything that has happened in your life since our last interview, which took place on x.y.2020 (the interviewer will fill in the exact correct date), until today. Please tell me about this period as a coherent story. You can mention anything that was important to you during this period, what changed in your life, what you did, how you prepared for your third graduation attempt, how you spent your normal days... Anything you can think of is important to us and it is up to you what you tell us about.

In addition, these follow-up interviews then included questions on specific areas that emerged during the initial analyses and needed more focus, such as self-directed learning, equity, and relationships. Thus, further interviews moved towards a semi-structured nature.

In the first stages of the research investigation, the data were first analysed using inductive open coding in ATLAS.ti. The inductively generated codes were sorted into categories that revealed thematic areas that emerged in the interviews. Deductive coding was also used in further analyses based on the themes that emerged from the initial inductive coding. Individual themes were then further elaborated into conference papers and journal articles; the core themes were selected for the thematic chapter of this research report. At the beginning of the project, it was determined that the research should help to uncover what failure factors might influence students' failure of the Matura examination, what further life and educational paths they choose after this failure, what influences them in their choice of path, and what motives and barriers lead or prevent them from retaking (successfully) the Matura examination. The identified themes cover and further develop these and a priori identified areas. Narrative analysis techniques were also used in the research within the conference outcomes and the chapters on the life stories of the examinees.

The analysis of the repeated biographical interviews was followed by a comparative cross-case analysis aimed at the empirically anchored identification of key themes and types within the life stories (Kluge, 2000). Five life stories of unsuccessful examinees were selected for which individual histories (biographies) were developed with respect to significant points in the life course. Only the 2020 cohort was selected for the case processing, as this was originally identified by the Ministry call. Another criterion was that all four interviews were conducted with each given informant to allow for multi-source analysis. The analysis procedure differed from that for the thematic chapters, which used a cross-sectional logic. Thus, the criteria for selecting cases corresponded to the deliberate available selection, called *information-oriented selection* (Flyvbjerg, 2006) in case study methodology. Overall, a *bricolage* approach to case analysis was used (Pratt et al., 2022), allowing for the combination of different research paradigms within a single design. Each case was first analysed and interpreted as a separate unit. Life histories were then constructed with respect to previously identified pivotal points in the life trajectory of the unsuccessful examinee that formed the context for the interpretation of the case. The chapter on the life histories of unsuccessful examinees is introduced by vignettes that represent the individual cases of the informants.

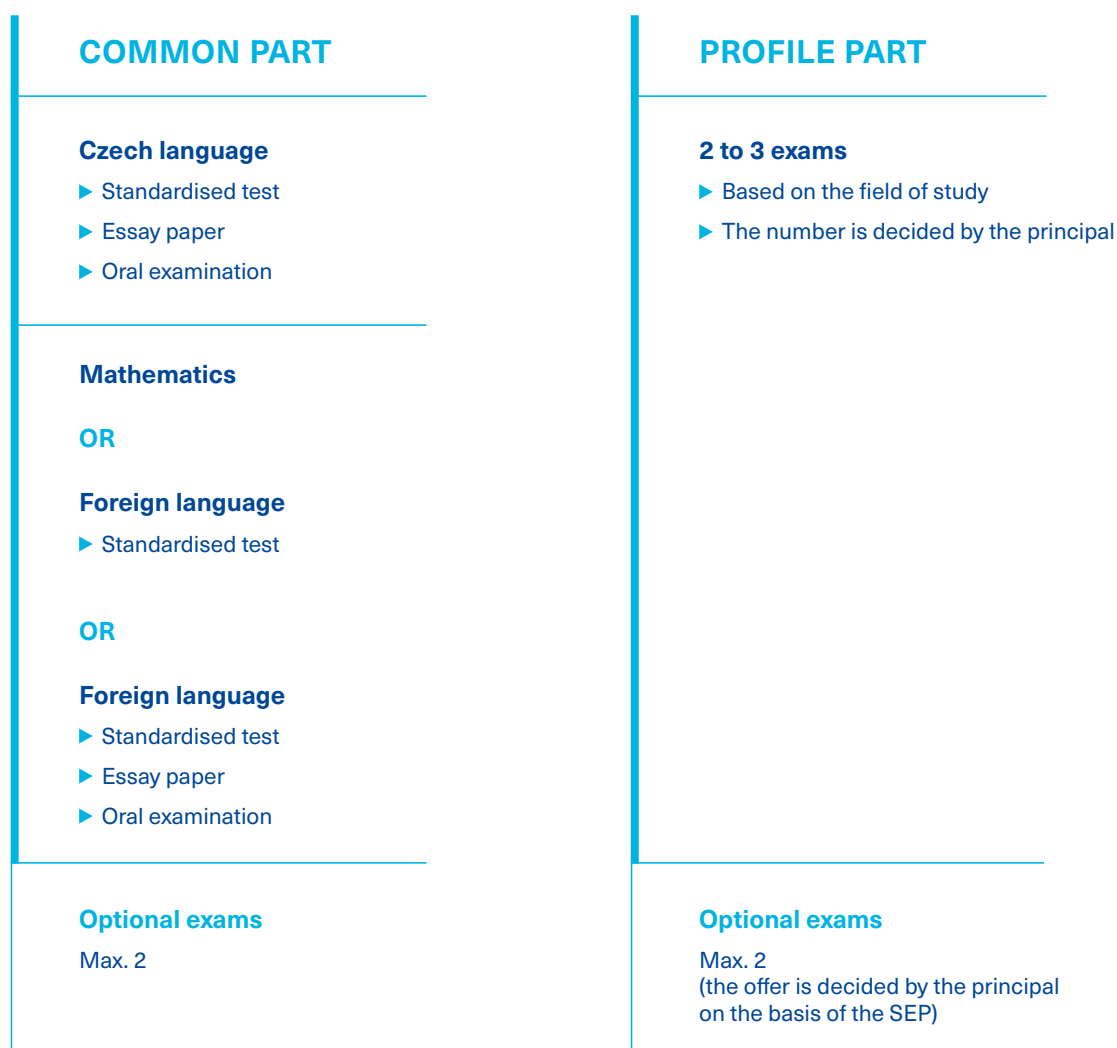


2 THE ORGA-
NISATION
OF MATURA
EXAMINATIONS
IN THE CZECH
REPUBLIC
IN THE
RESEARCH
PERIOD

In the Czech Republic, the format of the Matura examination was changed in 2011, and since 2013 it has been roughly stabilised into two basic parts: a common and a profile part. The Centre for the Measurement of Educational Outcomes (CERMAT) is responsible for setting and evaluating the common part of the exam. Students must officially register for this part of the exam in their graduating (i.e. final) year of study. In the application form, they indicate which subjects they have chosen to take. Two examinations are compulsory: one must be in the Czech language and one in mathematics or English (see Diagram 1). The Czech language exam, which consists of a standardised test, an essay and an oral part, is compulsory for all students. Students also have the option of choosing the so-called optional exam, for which they must also register, but which they do not have to repeat in the event of failure (CERMAT, n.d.-d). If a student fails the compulsory part of the exam in the regular term, that student has the option of making use of two remedial terms, for which they must always register. In the case of remedial attempts, the examinee only takes the part of the exam in which they failed (e.g. they might repeat only the standardised test in Czech language). It is not possible to change the subject in which the test is taken for remedial attempts.

If the individual fails the exam on the second remedial attempt, they may apply for re-enrolment in the final year of secondary school. Subsequently, they must register for the Matura examination, which in this case is taken over again in the full scope, which also entails the first formal possibility of changing the subject in the common part of the Matura examination (MEYS, 2009; 2012). In total, each examinee has five attempts and five years from the first attempt to succeed in the Matura examination, so it is up to the examinee to decide on which of the terms they want to sit the exam. Currently, there are usually two terms set for the common part of the Matura examination in one calendar year. The first term is usually held in May; the second is usually held in September of that calendar year (CERMAT, n.d.-d). The profile part of the Matura examination is the responsibility of the principals of the individual schools, depending on the specific field of study. Students may choose two or three subjects; the number of subjects is also decided by the school principals (Decree No. 177/2009 Coll.). In the common part (see [Diagram 1](#)), all students take the Czech language exam. The second exam is either mathematics or a foreign language, depending on the individual decision of the student (MEYS, 2012).

DIAGRAM 1 Matura examination



Between 2020 and 2022, changes in the form of the common part of the Matura examination and the number of individual attempts were influenced by measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic, see [Tables 8 and 9](#). In the context of this paper, however, we are only interested in changes in 2020 and 2021, the years in which the research was conducted. In 2020, there was a postponement of the dates for the Matura examination and also a modification of the exam: part of the exam in both Czech and foreign languages, the essay paper, was cancelled (MEYS, 2020). One year later (2021), the changes were more extensive. They were (1) again the cancellation of the essay paper, (2) the adjustment of the time for the test, (3) the addition of an attempt for all those who have the possibility to take the Matura examination, and (4) the cancellation of the summative assessment of the exam, which was instead assessed as pass/fail. The most significant change was (5) voluntary standardised tests for students in selected health and social science fields who had worked a minimum of 160 hours in health or social services or health protection authorities under predefined conditions (MEYS, 2021).

The dramatic nature of the situation during the Covid-19 pandemic should not obscure the fact that the problems of unsuccessful examinees during this period are fundamentally the same outside the pandemic. The pandemic situation highlighted and accentuated these problems, increased the distance between student and school, and further reduced the possibilities for educational and counselling support. By contrast, it expanded the possibilities of (for example) online tutoring. Last but not least, organisational changes ensured that the failure rate in the Matura examination did not increase in the Covid years.

TABLE 8 Modifications to the Matura examination in 2020

Common part		2020		
		Maintained parts	Cancelled parts	Changes in time allocation
Examination of the subject	Czech language	standardised test, oral examination	essay paper	×
	foreign language	standardised test, oral examination	essay paper	×
	mathematics	standardised test	×	×
Number of attempts	1 regular	2 remedial		
Changes in general	No students who were registered for Matura exam could be graded 'unsatisfactory' or 'not assessed' at half-term.	Postponement of the exam date by about a month compared to previous years		

TABLE 9 Modifications to the Matura examination in 2021

Common part		2021		
		Maintained parts	Cancelled parts	Changes in time allocation
Examination of the subject	Czech language	Standardised test	essay paper	increase by 10 min (for * ST)
	foreign language	Standardised test	essay paper	increase by 10 min (for * ST)
	mathematics	Standardised test	×	increase by 15 min
Number of attempts	1 regular	3 remedial		Announcement of an extraordinary term for July 2021
Changes in general	Cancellation of summative assessment for all parts of the exam	All parts of the exam are graded on pass/fail basis + pass percentage only	** Change in the final year of selected health and social sciences	

* ST – standardised test

** A change in the final year of selected health and social care courses: students who have worked 'even under the conditions laid down by measures of a general nature (MGN) for at least 160 hours with health authorities or health or social care providers' could take the standardised tests voluntarily.

3

KEY
RESEARCH
FINDINGS



The following chapters answer the specific research questions as predefined in the research project and developed through inductive qualitative research. They present key findings that reflect the reasons for and consequences of repeated failure in the Matura examination as perceived by unsuccessful examinees. These themes crystallised in the process of seeking to answer the main research question 'How are psychosocial stress and social exclusion in institutional settings seen in how the subsequent life and educational pathways of unsuccessful examinees develop over the two years following the experience of failure?' The guiding principle in the analysis is the informants' perception of their individual life trajectory and specific educational situation. These are reflected upon by the informants and interpreted by the research in a developmental manner.

3.1 Perceived (in)equity in the preparation for the Matura examination

Students see the lack of reflection of the continuous assessment of their work in the overall result of the Matura examination. Repeatedly unsuccessful examinees thus perceive that their results during their studies at secondary school may not fully reflect their readiness for the Matura examination. This, together with other indicators, leads to a perceived injustice in that the results of the Matura examination determine whether a student has completed secondary education.

Theoretical framework

The principle of fair educational opportunities is one of the pillars of education policy. According to Grisay (1984 in EGREES, 2005, further Bell, 1973) this principle can be examined at three levels: (1) equity at the input, (2) equity in the provision of quality education, and (3) equity at the output. Uniform admissions tests (CERMAT, n.d.) are an attempt to fulfil the first level in the Czech Republic. All undergo a prima facie fair and equal basic education, while the uniform admissions tests are intended to ensure equality of opportunity for all students to continue in their chosen secondary school. In the case of the common part of the Matura examination (MEYS, 2009), the question is to what extent the second and third levels are fulfilled and whether all secondary school students have equal access to a quality education that will prepare them for the Matura examination. There is an effort to maintain the second pillar, which means that all students across different types of secondary schools should achieve the same minimum knowledge (expected outcomes) to pass the Matura examination; however, the expected learning outcomes of each Framework Education Programme vary across different types of secondary schools. This may appear as a violation of the third pillar that leads to equity in the output. The aim of this chapter is to map and approach the perception of (in)equity in the preparation for the Matura examination through the perspective of repeatedly unsuccessful examinees.

If a student fails the Matura examination, that student has completed only basic education (except for the follow-up education). However, only the Matura examination determines this result. Students perceive this as unfair because (1) the final result does not reflect the continuous assessment achieved during their studies and (2) the result of the Matura examination determines whether the student has completed secondary education.

FIRST RESULT: Lost effort

The first injustice is perceived as the effort the student put in during their studies and that was not acknowledged in the Matura examination assessment: *'I did a lot of work, and I actually studied continuously for those four years. I didn't cheat on any test; I didn't give up on any test. Just nothing and I still didn't get it back'* (Božena). At the same time, they perceive it as unfair that the result of the Matura examination determines their (non-)completion of secondary education: *'It's like the end of secondary education, because you're actually studying a field with the Matura exam (...). So you end up with that basic education'* (Berenika). Brenda saw this similarly: *'I will only have the basic education because I didn't pass the state Matura examination from Czech.'* In Brenda's eyes, the Czech language exam was not as important as the exam in specialised subjects, which she saw as the most important for her chosen profession.

SECOND RESULT: Missing signals

In the course of their studies, secondary school students are tested and assessed, with summative assessments prevailing in Czech secondary schools (Laufková & Novotná, 2014). This assessment gives students feedback on the level of their knowledge in relation to the demands placed during the course of study. The actual study at secondary school is intended to prepare students for the final examination, i.e. the Matura examination. It is therefore perceived as unfair that the efforts made by students in the course of their studies do not reflect their actual readiness for the examination. They also perceive it as unfair that the results of the whole study process are not reflected in the Matura examination result. A student who has duly fulfilled their obligations throughout their studies and has completed all the years of secondary education may still fail the Matura examination. Such students will thus find themselves with only a formally completed basic education (the exception is in the case of follow-up education, where the student has successfully completed lower secondary education) and will not be able to pursue a number of professions for which it is necessary to have passed the Matura examination (e.g. accountant or nurse).

THIRD RESULT: Differences between schools

In addition, secondary school students are aware of the differences in the preparations for the Matura examination among different types of secondary schools. Students perceive the different conditions of preparation between follow-up education, technical school education, and grammar school education as unfair due to the difficulty of the Matura examination. One influence on the perceived unfairness is the time spent on Matura subjects at schools: *'It is certainly unfair that when I went from the vocational to the follow-up education, the follow-up school has the same Matura examination as people from the secondary general school, when they study for four years and we only have two. That seems unfair to me'* (Bibiana). The second factor is the amount of knowledge they can gain: *'And I actually have a comparison with the fact that I went to secondary general school from sixth to ninth grade, so even in maybe that sixth grade we took more things even in Czech than in secondary technical school before the Matura examination'* (Blanka).

Conclusion

Repeatedly unsuccessful examinees in our research perceived that preparation was not the same across different types of secondary schools. Students at secondary technical schools, and most noticeably those at follow-up schools, considered the insufficient time allocation for subjects in the common part of the Matura examination to be unfair. They often compared their studies with those at secondary general schools, either on the basis of their own experience, as Blanka did, or on the basis of the experiences of friends who studied at secondary general schools. Repeatedly unsuccessful examinees also perceived it as unfair that the Matura examination was, in their opinion, set to the standards of secondary general schools, which secondary technical school students cannot reach, precisely because they do not have enough hours devoted to teaching subjects from the common part of the Matura examination. For this reason, students often choose the 'lesser evils' from the range of subjects for the Matura examination (Hloušková et al., 2023).

3.2 Predictors of Matura examination failure and the education dropout threat

The predictors of failure can be understood as signals, the occurrence of which may point to the possibility of dropouts, both during educational paths and also in case of failure in the Matura examination. The identification of predictors and their investigation makes it possible to detect at-risk students and to provide them with appropriate support. We can divide predictors according to whether they occur on the side of the individual or on the side of the school.

Theoretical framework

The issue of premature school leaving is closely linked to repeated failure in the Matura examination. As shown by CERMAT (n.d. - a) data, failure in the Matura examination usually generates further failure in remedial attempts, which may subsequently lead to leaving the education system with only a basic education attained. Dropping out of the education system is a phenomenon that has received considerable attention, particularly in foreign educational research, where the aim is to identify students and pupils at risk of failure. The research findings show that a number of factors associated with dropout can be identified that may be familial, institutional, or individual in nature (Suh & Suh, 2007). The following chapter pays attention to selected predictors that may have signalled future repeated failure in the Matura examination. The empirical data shows that predictors of failure can be distinguished at the school and individual level.

School-level predictors represent the institutional level of context involved in failure at Matura examination. These school-level factors were primarily shown in our data through the approach of Matura subject teachers to their students. Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) described the ways in which schools contribute to dropouts, either directly or by mediating other factors that lead to the resulting failure. On the school side, the following factors leading to failure can be more specifically identified in the experiences of unsuccessful examinees: self-fulfilling prophecies, frequent teacher turnover in Matura examination courses, and teacher pressure to choose a particular Matura examination course.

FIRST RESULT: Self-fulfilling prophecy

The first institutional predictor of failure may become apparent immediately upon starting secondary school. Teachers questioned the ability of the students in the sample to study the relevant programme or directly to pass the Matura examination. Thus, in the case of those who did eventually fail the Matura examination, it was a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Bibiana recalled being discouraged from taking the Matura examination: *'We had a mathematics teacher who intentionally wanted to remove all of us from the follow-up studies. She didn't want us to have the Matura examination. The first day we came to that class, she said that not everybody had to have a Matura exam. We just looked at each other and said, "But we want it and we need it, we want to try."'* This respondent had enrolled in follow-up education after her secondary vocational schooling because she wanted to pass the Matura examination and she was determined to try her best to do so. However, she encountered a disincentive to achieving this goal in the form of the teacher's disinterest in preparing students for the Matura examination. In other cases, the teacher communicated a negative message about the student's disposition as a means of pressuring the student's decision, *'Well, mainly she said that if I chose that English, she wouldn't let me take it, so... So I guess, that was it.'* (Amálie). The teacher thus forced Amálie to choose mathematics instead of English by threatening her, which has significant consequences given the rule that Matura subjects cannot be changed until all attempts have been exhausted. It turns out that there are teachers in secondary schools who do not believe in the potential of every student to pass the Matura examination. Students then have to struggle not only with themselves to prepare adequately on their own at home, but also with the institution at which they are studying to receive preparation within the curriculum. As the interviews with other respondents showed, this factor can become apparent as soon as they enter the Matura programme, and it follows examinees throughout their studies.

SECOND RESULT: Changing teachers

Another institutional predictor is related to the course of study. In the students' narratives, there were complaints about frequent changes of teachers who were teaching Matura subjects. During the course of secondary school, unsuccessful examinees could have several teachers within the same Matura subject. '(...) *actually, in those four years we had three class teachers. That was quite a comedy too, we actually rotated English teachers, we had five of them. And the maths teachers were the same thing. And I guess the rotation was the biggest stumbling block because I graduated from everything but maths*' (Damián). As the quotation shows, sometimes this happened in several subjects at the same time, making the inconsistency of preparation for the Matura examination even more pronounced. As with the factor of doubting teachers, the Matura course subject teaching is sabotaged by the school, albeit in this case unintentionally due to changes in the teaching staff. However, it is alarming that schools do not have established mechanisms to monitor the consistency of teaching in the Matura subjects, as consistency is essential for successful learning.

THIRD RESULT: Impossibility of choice

The last of the selected factors relates directly to the end of studies, i.e. the Matura examination and its planning. The interviews with unsuccessful examinees highlighted the practice in some schools of putting pressure on the choice of a particular Matura subject. Not all secondary school students can choose between a foreign language and mathematics for the common part of the Matura examination, and in practice they face preselection by the school curriculum, the school, or the teacher. Dante attended such a school and commented on the obligation to graduate in mathematics: '*Because in some schools, for example, mathematics is not compulsory, but in some schools, it is, as a Matura examination subject.*' Based on his experience, Dante attributed his failure in the mathematics Matura examination to the fact that he could not choose another subject. Students may find that a subject or the education in it is not the most appropriate choice for them. However, there is no going back. Dante explained in the interview that he disliked the teaching methods of his mathematics teacher, which he described as too academic and not adapted to the needs of secondary vocational school students. Other research studies (e.g. Barakat & Harz Allah, 2010) have indicated that a teacher's lack of appropriate pedagogical and psychological approaches to students can be a significant factor leading to the students' academic failure. Institutional predictors represent a kind of trap in the educational system in which unsuccessful examinees are caught, and they cannot overcome it by their own efforts alone.

The individual level refers to the characteristics of the individual student. Three selected predictors will be presented, the occurrence of which may be a signal of failure in the Matura examination: engagement, test anxiety, and specific learning needs.

FOURTH RESULT: Student engagement

According to Rumberger and Rotermund (2012), **student engagement**, which we understand as the degree of participation or identification with the school environment, appears to be an important factor with respect to the risk of failure. Positive engagement can be described as student interest and active involvement in school activities. Insufficient engagement, on the other hand, is manifested by disinterest and a desire to avoid participation. The level of engagement during the course of study can also be reflected in the preparation for the Matura examination itself, as demonstrated by student Amálie: '*The vocational subjects, I found them easy because I enjoyed them. (...) They were the easiest to learn. (...) Maybe it was also because of the teacher.*' As can be seen from the quotation, student interest in a subject promotes motivation in learning, which leads to preparation and mastery of the study material seeming easy. The question remains whether this engagement is based on the content of the subject or just on the characteristics of the teacher, who plays a key role in imparting knowledge. Disinterest, on the other hand, is revealed in a lack of motivation and a desire to avoid learning at the expense of other activities: '*So I didn't really like give much to studying yet, so it was like, fun here, fun there, and the studying was like not much*' (Daniela). Success in the Matura examination can be predicted in relation to the level of engagement in secondary school studies.

FIFTH RESULT: Test anxiety

Another selected predictor that may indicate possible failure in the Matura examination is test **anxiety**. We understand test anxiety as the experience of negative emotions and feelings during the test that negatively affect success during the test. As demonstrated by the conducted research, test anxiety negatively affects the learning process and the performance in the test situation itself (Schunk et al., 2014). As evidenced by the respondent Denisa, stress was an important aspect that affected her performance, *'As soon as the day came, I was so stressed that I couldn't even speak, nothing, so I actually panicked like crazy out there, and I didn't even pass the test.'* For the Matura examination, the perceived stress is reinforced by its social importance and also its significance for the individual's future academic and professional career. Thus, test anxiety may be another predictor: its presence for students may signal failure in the Matura examination.

SIXTH RESULT: Special educational needs

The third predictor is the student's **special educational needs**, which put them at a subjective disadvantage in the Matura examination. The first group is represented by students with specific learning disabilities who rate the time concession as insufficient, as student Berenika pointed out: *'I have dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dysorthography... (...) And there the problem is that exactly – I write, for example... I don't know... I make a mistake myself; I don't even realise the mistake... I write a sentence somewhere; I don't even know that the sentence was... Maybe I missed a letter... Unless I spell it myself. And for me, just the thing that looks optimal, I don't see it. (...) You can't find your own mistake, let alone find other people's mistakes. Let alone find fault in something where you just can't see the fault. You can't. And it was like... 'Find the commas, find this...'* Now I don't know, it's a long text, you're glad you read it in that time. Let alone, like, look for mistakes in it!' As can be seen from the quotation, a specific learning disability puts the student at a particular disadvantage when solving certain types of problems. In addition to the difficulty, the time burden is also evident, which does not allow for sufficient attention to be paid to other tasks. Students with a different native language may be an example of another group. Brenda is no longer in a defined period of relief in her performance assessment in Czech: *'So I was actually in the Czech Republic for ten years at that time. Eleven. And so I was worried about that, because I'm sure some of the feeling in the Czech language, where I make some mistakes that are maybe terribly noticeable, but I can... Like I don't have the right feel for it.'*

Conclusion

By its very nature, the Matura examination exam should reflect the education system's efforts to set up an inclusive environment that reflects the needs of each student so that their potential is fulfilled. In practice, the presence of a particular special learning need can be a warning sign of potential failure in the Matura examination.

3.3 Specifics of the preparation for repeated Matura examination attempts

The crucial moment for an unsuccessful examinee is the first failed remedial attempt. At this moment, there is a certain acknowledgement of one's own failure and a confrontation with the demands of the outside world. This moment is also decisive for the future career and study trajectory, and this is where the focus should be on supporting the students.

Theoretical framework

The aim of the Matura examination is to test the knowledge and skills that students have acquired throughout their secondary education. Given the scope of the subject matter tested, there are demands on the method of preparation. Seli and Dembo (2020) pointed out that secondary school is an environment in which teachers guide students on how, when and what to learn throughout their education and raise their motivation. The curriculum is divided into smaller learning and thematic units, the mastery of which is regularly reviewed. By contrast, in the preparation for the Matura examination, the individual student's ability to achieve the set objectives in the long term and to meet the many criteria is brought to the fore. According to Zimmerman (2002, pp. 55–56), this process of self-directedness in relation to the achievement of a certain learning goal can be characterised as self-regulation of learning in which the student becomes 'an active agent in his or her own learning process in terms of activity, motivation and metacognition'. The prerequisites for self-regulation include the student's ability to define their own meaningful goals, the potential for directing and controlling their own activities, the ability to shape activities with respect to goal attainment, and the reciprocal relationship between the student and their environment, learning, and behaviour (Mareš, 2010). The self-regulation of learning for the Matura examination can be illustrated through a model that distinguishes three basic phases that are repeated cyclically in each attempt to pass the Matura examination (Panadero, 2017; Zimmerman, 2002). The first phase is the preparatory phase, in which the student prepares for the Matura examination, sets a strategy for learning, and implements the individual steps. This is followed by the performance phase, the moment of the exam when the student is present in the school. The cycle concludes with the reflective phase, when the student reflects on their own performance and decides on the future direction. Thus, preparation will be viewed mainly through the reflective phase, which appears to be important for comparing oneself with failure, interpreting and formulating a way forward. This reflection thus makes it possible to reveal the perspective of the students themselves in relation to the failure they experienced.

After unsuccessful first term of the Matura examination, the failure is explained by the student as a kind of coincidence that was influenced by external causes. There is no reflection on the preparation so far, which reinforces the assumption that the remedial attempt will already be successful even if no effort is made. The belief thus influences the way of preparation, which in turn leads to failure on the remedial term.

FIRST RESULT: Causal attribution

From the perspective of causal attribution theory, i.e. the attribution of causes to one's own behaviour, it is clear that the causes of first failure are described as external, unstable, and uncontrolled from the students' perspective (Graham, 2020). The rationale for first failure is often based on an attempt to downplay it, arguing that the failure is not related to one's own ability: *'Well... So actually when I didn't pass the first time, I was just like... 'Yeah, it happens.' It can happen to anyone'* (Daniela). A different approach was evident in Blanka's approach, shifting the responsibility for failure to an external factor: *'But I mean, I don't want to advocate for myself, but just if I was the only one who didn't pass, of course, then it's caused by me. But by there being so many of us, it's a bit of a calling card for the school just... Something does play that part in it, or plays that part.'* Thus, failure is not due to one's own ability or the way one prepares; it is caused by the influence of the external environment in the form of lack of support from the school, a difficult Matura examination test, or surrounding conditions. The perception of failure as a kind of chance, in turn, is indicative of attributed instability, which means that students believe that their failure will not be repeated because they perceive it as a kind of coincidence. Thus, students expect that the failed attempt will not be repeated, and they will succeed on the next attempt. The way of coping with a given adverse situation is based on comfort preference, neglect, passivity, and disinterest (Rijavec & Brdar, 1997). These tendencies are adversely reflected in the 'summer' preparation, which remains essentially unchanged from the first preparation, affecting the outcome of the next remedial attempt.

SECOND RESULT: First wake-up

The second failure, i.e. failure in the first remedial term, appears to be crucial in terms of the approach to further preparation, as it has a significant impact on the student's life. Increasing pressure from the social environment comes to the fore, potentially fostering a negative perception of one's own abilities. Students are also confronted with the transition to the labour market and responsibility for their future career direction. As Berenika pointed out, the turning point of the second attempt lies in uncertainty and lack of knowledge: *'And I just said I don't know. Because at that moment you really don't know anything. (...) Because actually everything up until now has been handled by your parents. And that's kind of the first moment when you realise that it's actually up to you. You don't know what to do.'* However, the feeling of uncertainty also goes hand in hand with a certain disillusionment that students experience due to failure on the first retake: *'Suddenly I didn't know what to do next, I was like how come I didn't just pass it the second time, I mean everybody's going to perceive me as... jeez that's the one that passed it the third time, I just felt like a person who's stupid basically, I was like I'm not up to it or I don't know. Well, the taxes were thrown at me, so I had to start working'* (Dalimil). It is evident from their accounts that, from the students' perspective, failure on a repeat term can be perceived as a failure with which a certain change of perspective is firmly attached, based on the turmoil experienced by the students. After the first remedial term, which is usually in September, the student can only repeat the examination again in the regular Matura term the following year. The original expected plans are disrupted by the absence of a Matura school-leaving certificate and limited employment opportunities. This puts individuals who have been students in a new role that contrasts with their school experience. There is also a considerable increase in pressure from the social environment, where the student is confronted with parental demands or the perceived social expectation of 'having a Matura secondary school certificate'. Repeated failure can affect a student's academic motivation, preferred goals, and self-concept (Kruger et al., 2016). The question for further preparation is whether the student will lose motivation for further learning or, on the contrary, manage to adjust their strategy for the new situation

THIRD RESULT: Shifting mindset about exam preparation

For students trying to persevere in their preparation and pass the Matura examination, the disturbance that occurs translates into motivation to change the way they prepare. However, further preparation is complicated by new work responsibilities. In the exam itself, performance can then be affected by the stress of another failure, which would mean repeating the whole fourth year of secondary school. Blanka, a student, pointed out the importance of tutoring and retaking tests, *'I think I did a lot before the third one, but... I tried all the standardised tests that existed, besides the once-a-week tutoring. I passed them all mostly at home. Even the one I couldn't pass like before. I just passed it at home! Maybe not as much as the older ones, but the older ones I could pass like almost at forty points.'* An important prerequisite for change is the realisation that the previous preparation was not enough: *'That I just really, like, neglected it, and I know I neglected it. I just didn't give it like basically anything. That I was just really into a million other things than this, yeah? That's the reason too'* (Daniela).

Conclusion

The experience of repeated failure can lead to a reflection on the current preparation strategy when students realise that they have not paid enough attention to learning. There is an acceptance of their own responsibility and an attempt to transform the previous learning strategy, which can be described as an adaptive decision that affects the preparation phase for the next attempt, when students have a clearer strategy and are aware of the specific steps (Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2014). In the case of an attempt to transform the strategy, there is tutoring or a focus on the problem areas of the exam. However, as already mentioned, preparation for the next remedial attempt can be affected by the accumulation of study and work obligations. The process of self-regulation of learning becomes more important in the context of the Matura examination, as the student's ability to set a strategy, implement it, and achieve the set goals comes to the fore in relation to success. This perspective makes it possible to emphasise the types of potential support for coping with the demands and circumstances that repeated failure brings to students. It is evident that student support should not be limited to preparation for the Matura examination; it should also take place between individual attempts in order to prevent students from dropping out of education or further delaying the successful completion of the Matura examination.

3.4 Perceived barriers in the process of obtaining the Matura secondary school certificate

Situational, institutional, informational, dispositional, and academic barriers stand in the way of success in repeated attempts. These barriers are interrelated or interconnected. Removing barriers is within the power of educational and counselling work.

Theoretical framework

After repeatedly unsuccessful Matura examinations, examinees face new barriers in addition to the problems that led them to failure. These barriers, due to the new life situation, can be mutually reinforcing in the perception of the examinees themselves and make the situation even more difficult to cope with. The barriers, as described by the examinees, can be classified into several categories. A typology of barriers to education can be found in Patricia Cross (1981). This has been adopted, among others, by the Adult Education Survey (2011, 2016, hereafter AES), by Rabušicová, Rabušic, and Šedová (In Rabušicová & Rabušic, 2008), and more recently by Kalenda and Kočvarová (2017). The barrier theory (Cross, 1981 and others) in education deals with barriers to entry into education as well as barriers to the achievement of educational goals. Cross distinguished between situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Subsequently, other authors (Potter & Alderman, 1992) have suggested that academic barriers should also be distinguished in relation to these categories. The AES (2013) further worked with informational barriers. We found these five categories, in a form specific to the situation of a secondary school examinee with a previous experience of failure in an exam, in our informants' accounts.

FIRST RESULT: New commitments

Situational barriers arise as a result of conditions that threaten student ability to fully participate in the educational process or to fully engage in preparation for remedial testing. They arise when a student's resources – time, energy, financial resources – become depleted, often as a result of conflicts in diverse roles in the family, in the community, and at work. Students also often lack the support of significant others. The unsuccessful examinees feel the need to move forward, to assume the roles associated with adulthood, and to balance priorities. They hesitate over whether, when they are no longer students but have not yet finished school, they should take responsibility for their own livelihood, become independent, and start working, or take advantage of possible support from either parents or a partner. Denisa's testimony illustrated how such dilemmas look, as she saw the possibility of making a living as a tram driver: *'So now I mainly want to finish my driving school so that I can start a course with the trams, where it will be like... There will be money that I can at least bring home at last. I don't have to have just my boyfriend to take care of me all the time, which is terrible for me. Cause I feel like a burden, or I don't know what to call it. And actually enjoy being able to go on a trip together or something. But mostly we want to save up for the wedding, so mostly we want to have something to save up for it. And stuff like that... So that's the main priority for me right now.'* Denisa turned her energies in this direction; she was eventually unsuccessful in her last remedial Matura attempt, lost her relationship as well, and changed jobs.

SECOND RESULT: Loss of support

Institutional barriers arise in the educational institution and in the student's interaction with it. The secondary school mediates the link between the student and the educational system with all its demands. Institutional barriers to obtaining the Matura examination are primarily due to the setting of the Matura examination as a standardised competency test set uniformly for all Matura examinees, regardless of the educational path that led them to the Matura examination (discussed in the topic of perceived inequity). In addition, some secondary schools themselves generate certain barriers to obtaining the Matura examination, e.g. to protect their reputation as an elite institution. This situation was described by Doubravka, who applied for the possibility of readmission to the fourth year at the secondary general school where she had failed her Matura examination: *'Because at my school in (locality) they actually told me that only certain schools do that, that they would take someone to the fourth year, only I have finished my studies there, so they wouldn't actually take me back. So I called around and the representative at our school in (location) suggested that I call around to private schools, where I have to pay for it but where they will take me (...).'* Schools also use legal loopholes to shift responsibility to the examinee and refuse to address their needs further. Logically, then, some schools are not interested in further supporting unsuccessful examinees, whether through tutoring or other help from teachers.

THIRD RESULT: Wrong information

Information barriers are those that are due to the lack of good information about the Matura examination procedure from the registration throughout the process. Problems with information about the examination process are repeatedly encountered with remedial terms, which are organised in a slightly different way. A lack of information leads to situations in which examinees are unable to assert their rights, e.g. in the organisation of the examination. *'Well, there we even lost five minutes of time at the beginning because of arguing with the teacher that there should be a clean paper for mathematics, which maybe even headed... And we should have that clean paper for our notes. When we need to do a big calculation. And she kept saying that it's like it's never allowed, and it never was, and I don't know what all... So we just argued with her about that, and then we just left it at that, because we knew we had no chance of winning, so we had the whole notebook completely scratched out. And again, I was absolutely nervous, and I could hear someone tapping on the table in the back with a pen. I was about to jump in, but I said, I can't – I'll get kicked out of class. That's just really... I was on pins and needles, literally'* (Denisa).

FOURTH RESULT: False consolation

Dispositional barriers consist primarily of attitudes towards education and perceptions of one's own ability to cope with the demands of Matura examination. Both are determined, among other things, by previous experiences with the educational process that induce unrealistic self-assessment and lead students to make wrong decisions. Paradoxically, this may also be in causing the perception that the examinee will pass the exam, even though they do not have the prerequisites for the exam on the basis of which they should choose the Matura subject. *'The teacher usually told us that no, it would be fine, that she had like led people to the Matura examination and they had passed it. (...) She said just no stress. She always said "keine panik" (laughs). And she was like, we shouldn't stress about it in the first place. That we could pass it all, that we were good at it, so she was like comforting us like that. And she was very nice, like that, but the teaching was, like, well, nothing'* (Aneta). With the repeatedly unsuccessful examinees, we found a lack of competence in a realistic appreciation of their aptitudes, which they sometimes overestimated and sometimes underestimated. These erroneous assumptions are a weak basis for developing an appropriate strategy for preparing for remedial attempts; similarly, they are unable to base good decisions about their future life path on these assumptions.

FIFTH RESULT: Compensation for weaknesses

Academic barriers are primarily represented by a lack of competence to learn. All unsuccessful examinees have completed their entire secondary school studies before the exam, some with difficulty, others without registering a signal of potential failure at the Matura examination. Yet they have in common that they do not feel competent to learn independently. As a rule, after a lack of success in a remedial attempt, they seek tutoring options and have to secure financial resources to cover the tutoring. Finding a tutor is often complicated and takes weeks or months that could be used for preparation. On the positive side, they may be able to find a competent person. This was illustrated by Aneta: *'So through like an acquaintance we arranged for tutoring. And she came every week mostly, sometimes twice a week, just depending on how we agreed, but the time was usually once a week as standard. And she also recommended completely different textbooks for me to buy, which we just went by, she taught me vocabulary and we really focused most on the grammar that's in those standardised tests. And by the fact that she knew it from the school she taught at, she just knew what to focus on.'* Somewhat paradoxically, secondary school teachers often re-enter the scene as tutors to compensate for student deficiencies that their colleagues have failed to address.

Conclusion

It is clear from the examinees' accounts that barriers have both objective and subjective aspects, and that barriers can be connected. On the individual side, the main barriers are dispositional and academic, hindering the examinee's learning. On the school and system side, informational barriers are often at the beginning of the chain of problems. The lack of information is a source of errors in the organisation of time and the way the exam is prepared for. Insufficient information from the school, the reluctance or inability of examinees to get information from relevant sources, and sometimes problematic initiatives by teachers or the school are barriers to success in the exam. Misunderstanding the nature of the exam, the setting of which oscillates between psychometric, achievement, and curricular paradigms (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2020), is in itself a barrier to success, all the more so as the school-based and state-based parts of the exam are quite different in nature.

3.5 Other life pathways of unsuccessful examinees

Repeated failure in the Matura examination disrupts the study and work plans of unsuccessful examinees. The loss of institutional support and student status leads to the occupation of new roles, further distancing the unsuccessful examinee from success in the exam. In this situation, it is desirable to allow, above all, advancement in the educational path, albeit conditional.

Theoretical framework

An individual's life course can be understood as 'a chain of closely linked events or states in different domains of life that a person experiences from birth to death' (Alan, 1989); these domains include family and intimate life, housing, health, work, and education. Thus, a life course is a continuum of closely interrelated domains that influence each other, and in which there are certain transitions or nodal points, i.e. key events that in a general perspective mark the transition from one state to another (Chaloupková Klímová, 2009). The Matura examination represents one of these key events, i.e. a transition in the life path of a secondary education student, especially in its educational and professional course. Passing or failing the Matura examination enables or prevents both the pursuit of qualified occupations in the labour market and the continuation of further studies at the tertiary level. Repeated failure in the Matura examination almost always means a change of plan, either temporary or permanent.

In principle, after an unsuccessful remedial attempt (usually held in September of the same year, i.e. about three months after the first unsuccessful attempt), examinees have the following options: (a) to enter the labour market and temporarily or permanently perform a job below the level of a graduate with a Matura secondary school certificate; (b) if they are unable or unwilling to enter the labour market, to enter the register of job seekers or job applicants of the labour office; (c) to continue their education and learning, both in formal education (e.g. entering the final year at the same school, studying a different field of study leading to either a Matura secondary school certificate or a vocational certificate) and in non-formal education and training (e.g. zero/preparatory year at university). In addition to these life pathways, an unsuccessful examinee may choose option (d) not to participate in the labour market and not to participate in any form of education, i.e. to be not employed nor in education or training (NEET) (see e.g. Levels et al., 2022).

FIRST RESULT: Lost ambitions

Although while studying a secondary school, a large number of repeatedly unsuccessful examinees have the ambition to continue their studies at university after the Matura examination, this ambition is lost in the complicated interim period. Interest in continuing formal education is replaced by work commitments, gaining qualifications for work, or interest in other experiences. *'Um, I didn't really want to go on studying any more. I mean, I had it really, like, scraped out, and I didn't actually get into one [college] school, I didn't actually pass the entrance exams, and I would have gotten into the other college, but there was this English thing, and I didn't really believe that I could...'* (Alena). *'And my aunt keeps pushing me to go to college, that I'm going to do it, but I don't want to. I just want to find a stable job. (...) I don't want to go on studying anymore. I enjoyed learning, I even enjoyed studying. I was even surprised myself that I like to learn, but now... somehow I don't have the motivation anymore. So that's it'* (Božena). However, some do not rule out this possibility for the future, such as Daniela: *'Maybe in a few years I will just get my mind right and I will come to the point where I will say: wow, and I still want to go to study. And maybe I would go, for the bachelor's degree, but who knows? Now I just know that I don't want to. (...) For me, the priority is that I've done the secondary school and I'm happy with that for now.'*

Interrupting a formal educational pathway after the second unsuccessful attempt has two types of consequences. The first is the entry into the labour market for most unsuccessful examinees, which means, among other things, that they become accustomed not only to a different regime but also to economic independence from their family of origin. This context concerns certain external factors. The second type of consequence concerns internal factors, such as the loss of motivation and to a large extent of self-confidence as a student, a learner, a person capable of studying for and passing university entrance examinations. The question is whether this is a disproportionate reduction in self-esteem or, perhaps for the first time, a realistic view of one's capabilities and abilities.

SECOND RESULT: Basic education

In the interim period between the second and third attempts to pass the Matura examination, unsuccessful examinees lose their student status for more than eight months, but still have not completed their secondary education. As a result, many of them, usually for existential reasons, have to find either a part-time job or a low-skilled job (even if they have successfully completed four years of secondary education). They then often stay in this job and in this position because they have 'gotten used to it' and the Matura secondary school certificate is of little relevance to them at this point. It is not unusual for examinees who pass the Matura examination on the second attempt to either continue for two more years in the low-skilled work they did between attempts or to move on (either within the organisation or in another organisation) to a job with qualifications equivalent to those of a secondary school graduate with a Matura secondary school certificate.

One example of this is Alice, who found a job as a cashier in a supermarket: *'I actually went to work as a temp right after my first attempt, where my mom works. And I actually had one part-time job there and I didn't even pass the second attempt, so my manager actually offered me to go for a full-time job.'* When asked what changed a year after successfully passing the Matura examination, she said *'I'm still in that job.'* Božena had a similar experience: *'After that Matura examination, we actually kind of have until now with the... the financial ones. So I had to start a job, I actually joined my mom's (business) where I actually help her measure different machines. And I'm also doing some part-time cleaning twice, just so we have more money. (...) I definitely want to stay in the job and nothing will change for me (after the Matura examination) and I want to stay in the job I'm in now.'*

THIRD RESULT: Back to school

The third unsuccessful attempt exhausts the examinees' opportunity to pass only the part of the Matura examination they had not yet completed. Often, they do not want to 'throw away four years of study' and decide to repeat their final year of study, which will allow them to retake the entire Matura examination. They return to the formal education system, either to the same school or to the same level in the system (retaking the pre-Matura year or more years if it is a different field of study). *'Like I didn't think about dropping out at all. Because the four years of study that I would have thrown away as a waste. (...) And then I looked for different other options and I found a school where I could finish my Matura secondary school certificate through distance learning'* (Brenda).

Some examinees lose their self-confidence with the third unsuccessful attempt and prefer to 'play it safe' by moving on to a lower level of study that will allow them to obtain at least a VET certificate and not just stay at the level of completed basic education. *'Well I was thinking like, whether I'm going to repeat that year, but I was so scared of that because completely different people, different teachers... So then I completely dismissed it. So I started looking for some... Like, vocational school certificate...'* (Amálie).

Because the informants had already become economically independent between the second and third attempts and needed to combine their studies with work, they looked for a school or field of study that they could study remotely. Most of them then passed the Matura examination, often thanks to a different approach by their teachers.

Conclusion

Repeated failure in the Matura examination is a significant interference in a person's (planned) educational and professional life path. A large number of those who planned to continue their studies at university after finishing secondary school give up this ambition even after passing the Matura examination at the third attempt and prefer to continue in the low-skilled work they did between the second and third attempts, or to advance to a higher level of work corresponding to their newly completed higher level of education. Those who are unsuccessful at the third attempt do not necessarily give up their efforts to complete their secondary education and may re-apply to study in a different field with a Matura secondary school certificate or at least a VET certificate. It could be said that repeatedly unsuccessful examinees try to finish what they have started, in which they have already invested four years of time and energy, but their ambition to progress further in education or on the professional ladder is rather low, at least in the two-year period after the first failure at the Matura examination.

3.6 The identity of unsuccessful examinees and their biographical learning

Unsuccessful examinees have developed their work, academic, and family identities to varying degrees, and these identities co-determine their relationship to the Matura examination and the meaning they attach to it. The life stories of unsuccessful examinees are characterised by a consistent effort to transform failure at the Matura examination into success in life.

Theoretical framework

It is important to look at how unsuccessful examinees perceive themselves and their lives and what they take away from their experience of failure. Our perception of ourselves and our lives creates our identity. By identity, we mean an individual's self-awareness, that is, the experience of who an individual is or feels themselves to be in various social settings. The narrative identity model presented by McAdams and McLean views identity holistically as being 'the internal and evolving story of a person's life, integrating a reconstructed past and an imagined future' (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). That is, identity is the narrative we construct about ourselves by internally retelling selected experiences from the past that we deem significant, as well as how we view the future. Thus, within this conception, it is possible to talk about, for example, family, academic, and work narrative identities, which together form a person's life story. In education, for example, the creation of a positive learning identity is essential (MacFarlane, 2018; Sfard & Prusak, 2005), as this identity then plays a key role in whether the learning process ends in what counts as a success or what is considered a failure.

For students whose secondary school studies ended in failure in the Matura examination, there is an assumption that they have not developed a positive learning identity for some reason. A possible explanation is offered by the theory that throughout our lives we experience situations in relation to social institutions that can lead to various conflicts within our identities (Bron & Thunborg, 2017). The process of learning about oneself and one's life is often referred to in the literature as biographical learning (Tedder & Biesta, 2007). The concept of biographical learning can be applied here in the form of two themes: What can the analysis of life stories tell us about the relationships between the narrative identities of students who have failed the Matura examination at least twice? And what did the unsuccessful examinees learn about themselves based on this life experience?

FIRST RESULT: Academic identity

Unsuccessful examinees lose their student status after the second attempt and thus their academic identity is compromised. While we do not have respondents in our sample who gave up the pursuit of a Matura secondary school certificate after a first or second failure, our respondents reported such cases in their narratives and are not far from being such cases themselves: *'So it ended up that we came to Matura examination, we were permitted to take it, I met exactly people there who just had been there for maybe a year... They had to work somewhere... Just to like make it through that one... Even there were maybe people who deliberately postponed taking the Matura examination, then there were people who didn't pass it either. And most of them, when I met them, most of them were already working and... And they told me that they weren't going back to school like ever again. That it was like a crazy experience for them, that they actually... You're really banned from society for a year. In a totally horrible way'* (Berenika). Through the loss of their status as secondary school students after a second failed attempt and being left to their fate, unsuccessful examinees feel marginalised.

SECOND RESULT: Work Identity

In the narratives of unsuccessful examinees, therefore, their academic identity becomes intertwined with their work identity. Throughout secondary school and in between Matura examination attempts, students acquire various work experiences (e.g., part-time jobs and internships) that influence how they think about their futures. However, in the narratives of unsuccessful examinees, it is possible to discern differences in how they perceive themselves within these experiences, i.e., in the formation of their work identity. The narrative identity of unsuccessful secondary school examinees is more work-oriented than study-oriented. As the following quotation illustrates, secondary technical school examinees relate their selves to the world of work: *'If I actually passed that Matura examination, I could actually progress and be a construction manager or something like that. Which is what I want to be like. That I would like to be there as a construction manager and not as a worker like that'* (Damián). Conversely, in a quotation from a secondary general school respondent, we can see that the work field is not yet the crucial thing in her story: *'It's kind of kicked me into not wanting to work yet, or yes I do, but it's not so acute that I end up quitting. (...) I don't want to say that it's a bad job behind the till, but it's not what I want to do for the rest of my life, and it's not what I find completely fulfilling'* (Doubravka). For this respondent, maintaining her academic identity was more important. The unsuccessful secondary general school examinees emphasise their academic identity in their narratives and their work identity stands in the back for the time being. From the above quotations, the differences between the importance of work and academic identity for secondary general school students and secondary technical school students are evident. For the secondary technical school students, gaining a Matura secondary school certificate meant the possibility of career growth; for the secondary general school students, gaining a Matura secondary school certificate was not sufficient in terms of work identity. For the secondary general school students, there was thus a stronger academic identity that made them perceive the Matura examination as a 'ticket' to tertiary education.

THIRD RESULT: Family identity

In addition to work experience, other circumstances enter into the experience of failure. Patterns from the family environment can guide the process of individual identity formation and determine the meanings inscribed in its narrative content (cf. Cierpka, 2002; Grotevant, 1997). In the narrative of the life story of unsuccessful examinees, various family-related pitfalls emerged. As one respondent stated, during her time in secondary school she regularly had to deal with existential problems that significantly interfered with the possibility of positively shaping her academic identity: *'I had an existential problem before every Matura examination, so before the first one my parents got divorced and it was a really difficult time because they were not able to agree on who was going to give me money for food, who was going to give me money for the cinema, where we were going to go with the school. So a lot of times I was on two bread rolls a day because my parents couldn't agree and I didn't have the money'* (Bronislava).

FOURTH RESULT: Identity struggles

In the narratives of unsuccessful examinees, especially from technical schools, there were also **conflicts between their identities** (*identity struggle*, Bron & Thunborg, 2017), e.g. between academic and family identity (*identity struggle*, Bron & Thunborg, 2017). For academic identity, this may mean dropping out of education during the course of study or academic failure at the exit of a given education, as was the case for our respondents. In their narratives, the deconstruction of family identity was shown in the form of the decision to leave the original family and start living alone during secondary school, which then threatened their successful studies – the family identity of unsuccessful examinees thus came into conflict with their academic identity. This situation was described by Bořek: *'So I have like divorced parents, so de facto on that first attempt actually... I had it even worse in that, if I'm responsible for it myself, I get to that de facto I'm like not living at home, I moved out. I was living away from home. So de facto here I was kind of dealing with these things on my own.'* Parental expectations can also be threatening to academic identity, as Blanka described, when asked about her father's response: *'He didn't say much anymore, well. Because it was already kind of... Well, the only thing he said was just like, "You've got to pass it, otherwise you really could've given up on school a long time ago." And so, well. And he was like, "You'll end up like one of my friends" who had two daughters, but neither of them completed it. At least I did. (laughs) "If you end up like that, they're working at the cash register." And I was like, "Well, great."'*

FIFTH RESULT: Biographical learning

So why do they do it, in spite of everything? Why do respondents who repeatedly try their luck at Matura examination not give up on trying to succeed? The unsuccessful examinees in our survey genuinely wanted to become someone who was successful in life. Often, they were already working towards this before the Matura examination in the form of various life plans. However, failure in the Matura examination got in their way and they had to learn how to deal with it. Their gradual learning of how to eventually become successful in life can be described as biographical learning. Respondent Bartoloměj compared this vision of success directly to his experience of the Matura examination, which he ultimately did not consider a failure: *'For me it was not a failure. For me it was a success. But like a pretty good success for me when you get out of something like that'* (Bartoloměj). In order to overcome failure, it is important to have a vision in life that allows one to see things in the bigger picture, as respondent Dalimil stated, *'The dream is to secure myself, my family and then bring my children into that secure environment with my wonderful girlfriend'* (Dalimil). Unsuccessful examinees not only have to overcome failure at Matura examination, but are often forced to reconfigure their entire lives to date. They have to change something in order for their efforts to be crowned with success. For others, their extra-curricular life is the driving force that helps them to recover from failure. Through biographical learning, i.e., working on their biography, students gradually emerge from their experience of failure. They compensate for failure in one area, i.e., studies, by focusing on building other areas of life: relationships, work, housing. The identity of an unsuccessful examinee thus gradually becomes the emerging identity of a successful adult. The students who participated in our research outright refused to be labelled as unsuccessful examinees, as they consistently struggled to overcome their failure and subsequently earn their Matura secondary school certificate despite the obstacles in their identities. That they did not give up this struggle was considered more important than repeated failure at the Matura examination.

Conclusion

Unsuccessful examinees developed their work and academic identity to varying degrees and related to their future education (passing their Matura examination or going to university) accordingly. Sometimes the relationship to work was stronger than their academic identity, especially for students in secondary technical schools. Family identity – parental divorce, existential problems, independent living during secondary school – also caused problems in their life stories. The life stories of unsuccessful examinees are characterised by a consistent, if sometimes clumsy, effort to transform these difficulties, as well as their initial experience of failure at Matura examination, into subsequent success in life. By gradually incorporating these experiences into their biographies, unsuccessful examinees learn to actively shape their subsequent life experiences.

4

LIFE
STORIES OF
UNSUCCESSFUL
EXAMINEES

The five selected stories of unsuccessful examinees illustrate certain specific features and, on the other hand, the complexity of each individual case. Each of the five cases is first introduced by a vignette and then by a more detailed narrative with the use of quotations. For each case, the situation at the entrance to secondary school, the school experience, the perception of the reasons for failure, other circumstances, and the support received by the examinee are described.

D O M I N I K

D A N U Š E

D A R A

D I T A

D A M I Á N

DOMINIK

Dominik's life story represents specific cases in which an examinee was unsuccessful in both parts of the Matura examination, i.e., the state and profile parts. As a consequence of this duplication, different combinations and timing of individual remedial attempts may occur in the educational pathway. Dominik did not take all the second Matura attempts in the September term; he postponed some of them for up to a year. At the same time, the changed conditions of the 2021 Matura examination due to the Covid-19 pandemic came into play, so the fluctuation of the Matura examination conditions can be seen in his case – by not using the September term, the second and third attempts could be taken a week apart. He had support from his family and school. Admitted to one Matura examination field, high number of missed classes, probably would not have been allowed to take the Matura examination if not for the pandemic situation. Support from the family and especially the mother on several levels: emotionally, financially, in finding tutoring and being thorough in the approach and in becoming her son's tutor herself.

Date of the first Matura Examination (ME) attempt:	2020
Type of secondary school at which the first ME attempt took place:	secondary technical school
Region in which the first ME attempt took place:	South Moravian Region
Failure in the common part of ME:	Czech language: standardised test, oral part
Failure in the profile part of ME:	practical exam
Number of unsuccessful ME attempts:	3
At the end of the research, the respondent was in ME:	successful

4.1 Dominik's story:

MATURA EXAMINATION TO BE CONTINUED

Dominik's life story represents cases in which an examinee is unsuccessful in both parts of the Matura examination, i.e., the state and profile parts. In such cases, the examinee has the opportunity to combine and time the individual remedial attempts in different ways. Dominik did not take all the second Matura examination attempts in the September term; he postponed some of them for up to a year. At the same time, the changed conditions of the Matura examinations in 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic entered into the game, so fluctuations in the Matura examination conditions can be seen in his case – when the examination was not attempted in the September term, the second and third attempts could be taken a week after each other.

When Dominik was choosing where he wanted to go after elementary school, he was inspired by his cousin, who was then a second-year student at a secondary school focused on information technology. Dominik was interested in this field because he was interested in computers. Subsequently, he submitted one application for that type of school in a larger and one to a school in a smaller city. He chose the Matura examination course, in his own words, *'so as not to have to be at a boarding school'* and after talking with his parents, to get *'something better'* and to overcome his laziness to learn. In the end, only one application was successful, so the choice was clear. As for the actual course of study, he had not been engaged in his studies since elementary school, which he explains by the fact that he has an *'aversion to school'* and is *'not much of a studious type'*. However, he was satisfied with the attitude of the teachers at the school, as the teachers did not exalt themselves over the students and did not judge anyone: *'The teachers, from my point of view, compared to the elementary school where I studied, were much more friendly and easier to get along with. They took it a bit like approaching an adult, even if they didn't have to, they were always happy to help.'* Dominik was able to build on this foundation of teacher support even after his first failure at the Matura examination. He agreed with the teachers on a kind of individual plan for passing in the remedial attempts.

In his narrative, Dominik did not directly state the reason for his failure in the Matura examination. However, taking a closer look at the other circumstances surrounding his Matura examination, he himself admitted that if it weren't for the Covid pandemic, he wouldn't have even been allowed to take the Matura examination. *'Well, I can honestly say that if it weren't for the pandemic, I wouldn't be allowed to take the Matura examination in the first place (laughs) because of the 400 missed classes in year 4.'* Even his grades got progressively worse: *'So it was also that those teachers tried to help and it went down with the grades. The third year was the worst. There it was getting a bit tooth and nail.'* Of the parts of his Matura examination that he didn't pass the first time, he passed some the second time, but others he didn't. He did not repeat the practical part of the Matura examination immediately in September; he postponed it until later: *'Well I was ill in September and the class teacher and I recognised that it was better to leave it because it was such a strange period.'* Last but not least, Dominik indicated the difficult conditions for the preparation for the Matura examination in that the teaching in the fourth year was non-standard: *'Well, like if I hadn't taken the Matura examination right now, I wouldn't mind the distance learning.'*

Dominik's family supported him so that he could succeed in his Matura examination. Both sisters have university degrees. He had a girlfriend who also supported him. Those closest to him did not put him down and believed that he would eventually be able to complete his Matura examination. Even his grandmother, a teacher, was sympathetic: *'With the grandmother who used to teach geography, she's a former teacher, so I was afraid that I would never even be able to go there again and she looked at me and said, well, you just extend your school time for a year, it's not going to bring the world down. Yeah so then it also makes you feel better for the exams or so subconsciously like it works better and that's probably really like helped me personally the most, apart from the studying of course and the tests, and the sort of psychological support.'* This support from the surrounding then translated into active help in preparing for remedial attempts: *'So it was more like she (mother) tested me the most because if someone doesn't test me then I don't even have a reason to study. So to keep me going, because she's quite busy at work, and*

my sister helped me a lot, I don't know if she likes Czech very much, but she's good at it. So she helped me with that and with the standardised test.' For the standardised test his sister supported him, and for the oral part he received intensive support from his mother, who even gave him advice on how to present the material: *'So then we solved it by having my mom retesting me every night when she came home from work, or maybe if she told me to look at it at the weekend and I didn't want to, then maybe at lunch or after lunch we would kind of go over it together, she explained to me how to talk about it, how it was good to talk about it, and actually she gave me a lot of advice on how to present it in the oral part, how to talk around it and what was important to highlight and what was less important and what I should focus on in the questions.'* In addition to supporting him in his studies, his family also supported him financially so that he could concentrate fully on preparing for the remedial attempts and not having to divide his time between preparation and work: *'We actually had this sort of agreement with my mum that actually until... actually until I go for the exams, that she wouldn't ask me to contribute anything like for the household and stuff, that she would take me, that she would still support me because I was sort of still studying even though I wasn't registered as a student anymore.'* This support translated into motivation for preparation and subsequent outcome.

Dominik also devoted himself to his field of study in his spare time, in the form of creating web pages. However, it was only a small part-time job, as he stated that it was difficult to find a stable job in the field without a Matura secondary school certificate. *'In my spare time, I now do custom web pages at home. Otherwise, since my student status ended, I went to work in a factory for a month and now recently I'm registered at the labour office doing the sites at home and waiting for the lady to make an appointment and depending on what they say there. Because in that field, as those teachers said, it's hard to get a job in that field without a Matura secondary school certificate.'* In order to help his family, he found a job in the meantime in a labourer's position, not ideal for him, but the fact that it was through an acquaintance prevailed, as he was able to start the next day and not waste time looking for a job. Immediately after passing his Matura examination he was also thinking about working abroad. But the most important thing for him was to hold on until everything was finished and then start looking for more stable work.

In September, a year and several months after his first attempt, Dominik successfully passed the last remaining profile part of the Matura examination: the practical exam (which included several subjects) and the oral exam in Czech. His success was due to intensive tutoring; with the help of his mother he even got tutors for specific subjects of the practical part (network administrator, programming): *'And we actually didn't finish all the lessons and we had already studied it all, repeated it all, so we had some lessons left, so we actually continued to see if there was some other subject that would be worth learning and we agreed on programming, which is also something you can learn mostly like a poem, that yeah it's actually lines of code, you can learn it by heart, it's not hard, but the gentleman that the company put in there actually helped me understand it, which helped me with the practical one, when I forgot something, I thought about how it should work.'* Dominik worked with a teacher from the secondary school where he studied to prepare for the next subject from the practical part of the course. Even for the subjects he prepared for on his own he had a well planned strategy. On his mother's advice, he planned out exactly how many questions he had to learn each day to make it to the remedial attempt and regularly checked how he was doing to see if his preparation was really effective. To some extent, he also used the tutoring he had received for the standardised tests in Czech to prepare for the oral part.

Dominik was therefore able to immerse himself intensively in the material, to try to gain a deeper understanding of the subjects and to combine independent preparation with active help from someone else: *'which actually I was sort of learning on my own, but we had those hours left, so the gentleman helped me with that, right, and we did that with him every day or every other day, that we had Monday, Wednesday, Friday, that he had like a lot of time and we were stuck for three hours often, so the last 14 days, as far as the programming was concerned, it was literally like they say when you have a fire up your ass.'* Tutoring gave his preparation a solid regimen, ensured that he actually had to set time aside to learn, rather than, for example, playing a computer game. At the same time, he discovered what style of learning suited him, that he needed to go over things more than once and not just learn them in spurts. So, when studying for the oral exam in Czech, he even increased the number of questions he had to go through each day so that he would have time to review them again later, as he found that he always happened to miss something when he came back to it later, etc. Using this approach, he was more confident that he would always end up remembering something.

At first, the future, as Dominik thought of it, was linked to getting his Matura secondary school certificate. The next step was to find a good job, for which he would need a Matura secondary school certificate. He managed to fulfil this goal, although he ended up not working in the field he had originally studied and planned to pursue. Two years after his first Matura examination attempt, Dominik was working in marketing. In his own words, he did not yet need college, but he did not rule out trying it in the future: *'I've been thinking, I've talked to my mom about it too, that*

maybe in time, if I feel like it, when she asked me if I want to go to college, maybe in those two years, even if it's hard, because when you stop studying and don't go straight there, it's harder to get into it. But we figured that maybe in those two years I'd try college, so that I would have the degree, when I have everything and I have peace of mind and a lot of time and I don't know what to do, I'd try maybe distance learning.' At first, his plans included moving from the small town he grew up in. In the end, he stayed in the apartment where he had lived with his mother, and she moved in with her boyfriend. Thanks to the support of his family, Dominik eventually gained stability, which he preferred to uncertainty thanks to his experience of failing the Matura examination. The experience of failing the Matura examination and overcoming that also brought him more responsibility for his own life: *'So definitely some sort of, like, psychological shift, or some sort of, like, greater alignment, I would definitely say that maybe I'm, I mean, I'm still struggling a lot, but I've definitely, like, gained some responsibility to some degree, if I compare it to that first attempt.'* Dominik's story illustrates the combination of the individual scheduling of Matura examination attempts, effective tutoring, and maximum support from both family and teachers that ultimately led to a successful Matura examination.

DANUŠE

Danuše's case is interesting for three reasons: her unusual educational path, her strong internal motivation to become a police officer, and the lack of external support. Danuše wanted to become a police officer since elementary school, and this motivation ran throughout the story, as did the lack of support from her social environment. After elementary school, Danuše decided to study at a vocational school, even though she knew that she needed to pass the Matura examination to pursue her dream job as a police officer. She then enrolled in a follow-up course but did not complete it due to her failure in mathematics, and then she went to the city where she began to study remotely while working part-time. After the second failure, she was still working at the same position, but on a full-time basis.

Date of the first Matura Examination (ME) attempt:	Spring 2020
Type of secondary school at which the first ME attempt took place:	secondary technical school (follow-up education)
Region in which the first ME attempt took place:	Capital City of Prague
Failure in the common part of ME:	Czech language: standardised test
Failure in the profile part of ME:	–
Number of unsuccessful ME attempts:	2
At the end of the research, the respondent was in ME:	successful

4.2 Danuše's story:

A TOO COMPLICATED JOURNEY TO A DREAM

After elementary school, Danuše studied for three years in the field of florist, she successfully completed it and received her VET certificate. She continued in follow-up education, which she did not complete because she failed mathematics. Since she had a strong inner motivation to become a police officer, she found a private secondary school that did not teach mathematics and decided to pass the Matura examination there. However, during her studies, she had to earn extra money for tuition fees and a special diet as she had several dietary restrictions. On her first attempt at the Matura examination, she failed only the standardised test in Czech language, and that by a single point. She lodged an appeal but it was not granted. Her story was interesting because she knew in elementary school that she wanted to be a police officer, but still chose an educational path through a vocational field. She pursued her vision on her own without the support of those around her; instead, she was often the support for those closest to her.

At the end of the ninth grade Danuše submitted only one application, for the three-year course of florist, which ended with a VET certificate, but at that time she had already planned to continue her studies in a follow-up programme and obtain a Matura secondary school certificate. She chose her educational path in this way gradually, as she thought it would be easier. Her goal was to get the Matura secondary school certificate and become a police officer. After successfully completing the vocational course, she was admitted to the full-time follow-up course, which she said was more challenging than the vocational course, but she enjoyed it: *'I was happy that I was selected for the course. So I went to (the city), also for Security Services. There it was also full-time study. I enjoyed it so much there that I lived it too, right. I was there every day and learning those subjects and that every day.'* Danuše's intrinsic motivation to work as a police officer runs through her entire story. Again, it is evident that she made a conscious decision to pursue her dream and dedicated herself to preparing for school. *'Actually, the teacher only had our class and he used to teach at the college, right, he was retired. (...) A lot of people failed maths and he didn't care. He even enjoyed it. He always said, "If you don't know something, just raise your hand and ask." And he always made the biggest fool out of that person.'* Although maths was one of the subjects she was not good at in elementary school, according to Danuše, that is why she found a tutor, but even so she did not pass the next grade. However, the teacher's attitude played a role in this case, as it caused Danuše stress during exams. Danuše therefore left the school and applied for a second follow-up study, this time choosing one without mathematics. She found such a course at a private school in another town. For Danuše, however, it was more demanding in terms of content and also in terms of form, as it was a distance learning course. In order to pay for her studies at the private school, she started working as a building security guard. In addition to paying for her studies, Danuše also needed a regular salary to pay for the expensive ingredients and food she needed due to her allergies.

The first year during her studies at the second school, she lived with her grandmother just outside the town where she studied. When her father fell ill, she decided to return home and work in her hometown. Danuše then needed money for transportation as well, as she commuted an hour and a half to school and back every day. During her final year, schools were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although Danuše describes this time as difficult, she does not cite this as the reason for her failure on the standardised test in Czech language. In all cases, she cites the stress of the exam as the reason. She had prepared for the second attempt over the summer months, in particular by completing the standardised tests from previous years, but as she said: *'Well I had some of them better, some of them worse, well, whatever. And it's just that you never know what they're going to put in the standardised test, well, I know I messed up on that one, and due to stress.'* The view of her own preparation, however, was transformative for Danuše. In hindsight, she stated that, *'Otherwise at home, I tried that, I had like, ten more like points, how can I put it. (...) Ten more points, maybe ten more in that, or ten twenty in that like to pass, that I still had.'* The transformation of her perception of exam preparation is evident, as is the transformation of explanations for failure in the Matura

examination. As time went on, Danuše stopped identifying stress as the only factor for failure and began to attribute failure on the exam to its difficulty, which in Danuše's eyes was increasing: *'It also seems to me that they are more like putting more demands on those examinees now.'*

During the whole period when she was trying to pass the Matura examination, Danuše did not have support from her surroundings, although no one made the process difficult for her. The only indication of support was a classmate who had also repeatedly failed the Matura examination: *'Sometimes we would write to each other, my classmate and I, that we would look into it, but it never came to that. Or maybe we wrote that we tried it and how much we got out of it and stuff.'* So it was a shared experience rather than the support of a classmate. After losing institutional support after her second unsuccessful attempt, Danuše forgot to register for the next remedial term in the spring of 2021 and did not proceed to it until the autumn of 2021. After this experience, Danuše repeatedly contacted the secretariat of the school where she was studying and obtained information about upcoming terms from them.

During this period, Danuše worked for the security service: *'Well, I do 12-hour shifts. So I'm at work from 6 to 6. That I would come in after work, wash up, eat, and then sit down for an hour over it. I told myself at least one of those tests when I got to it after work. A lot of times I got tired of even reading it, or even thinking about it.'* As mentioned, Danuše paid for her tuition and the special meals she needed due to her medical limitations. She stayed in her hometown and supported her father who was seriously ill. Even without a Matura secondary school certificate, Danuše began her studies at a tertiary professional school, signing a contract with the school to pass the Matura examination by the second year. According to Danuše, the admission to the tertiary professional school programme was facilitated by the fact that she studied a follow-up programme at that school.

Before the third attempt, Danuše struggled with her motivation to pass the Matura examination and her unwillingness to repeatedly prepare for the standardised test, which she repeatedly failed by one to three points. Eventually, she came up with a strategy that worked for her: *'Me, if I just kept doing it like this over and over again, I was going to take maybe two tests every day, so I knew that after that I wouldn't be able to focus on it when it was for real. That I wasn't going to enjoy it, I wasn't going to be interested in it and I was just going to get lost in it like I did last time, so I thought it was better if I just took like a longer break and, like, what I wasn't good at I kind of learned and I thought, I'm not going to stress myself out now and I thought I'm just going to take a completely different method than I did then, but that, like, I just, I said that's the method: Screw it. So that I wouldn't, like, stress myself out, and oddly enough, it worked.'* At the same time, she wrote down words she didn't understand on the test, which she said helped her train her brain and not be stressed by the actual standardised test assignment. Thanks to the chosen strategies, the stress left Danuše, she did not think about the questions in a complicated way, and she understood the assignment. Danuše passed the standardised test on the second attempt and thus passed the Matura examination.

After her success in the Matura examination, Danuše applied to study at the tertiary professional school in the same field as her follow-up studies. She applied to the police, where she was not accepted, but she did not give up her goal: *'I know that it's just so demanding, so I would rather leave it until after that year and a half or two years, when I fully complete my studies.'* Danuše's determination and strong inner motivation were the interesting parts of her story, as was the lack of external support from family or friends. Her story illustrated her independence in preparing for the exam and her ability to take care of her own needs, as she had to earn the money for everything she needed or wanted.

DARA

In Dara's case, the key role of the aunt who became involved in the preparation after the first remedial attempt highlighted the importance of the support of the immediate social environment. The preparation was conducted in a directive and long-term manner that in the end, also according to the respondent, was the key to success. The choice of the given field of study was based on practical application without the need to study at university. The secondary school study was subsequently complicated by pandemic measures. After the second unsuccessful attempt, Dara took up a part-time job that allowed her to raise funds. The temporary job was obtained through the respondent's mother, who also subsequently talked her out of the temporary job to give her time to prepare. Support from family and immediate social environment is crucial for coping. In this case, the support was clearly instrumental in the form of tutoring or help in finding a part-time job, as well as emotional in terms of expressions of security and acceptance.

Date of the first Matura Examination (ME) attempt:	2020
Type of secondary school at which the first ME attempt took place:	secondary technical school
Region in which the first ME attempt took place:	Moravian-Silesian Region
Failure in the common part of ME:	–
Failure in the profile part of ME:	Accounting
Number of unsuccessful ME attempts:	2
At the end of the research, the respondent was in ME:	successful

4.3 Dara's story:

SUCCESS THANKS TO HER AUNT'S GUIDANCE

Dara attended a business academy and a tertiary professional school and failed the regular and repeated exams in the accounting profile part of the Matura examination. Following her failure, the support of her family was evident, as it played a key role in preparing her to pass the Matura examination. Dara represents the type of repeatedly unsuccessful examinee who was supported despite her failure, which enabled her to cope with the situation and use the failure as an experience for further development.

Dara chose secondary school studies at a business academy and a tertiary professional school mainly because of the possibility of finding a job without having to go to university. The choice of the school can be described as pragmatic, yet not entirely determined. Dara reflected on her own studies as satisfactory, although she could have paid more attention to them: *'That first year was fine, like there was no problem, I think back. Maybe if I'd paid a bit more attention to my studies it would have all been easier, but I never failed and I didn't have any extra bad grades, so it was kind of, dare I say, okay.'* She assessed the third year as more challenging because more study material started to come in. The fourth year coincided with a pandemic situation in which schools were closed and classes were held online. It was this moment that Dara assessed as important in terms of preparing for the Matura examination, as there was some isolation and separation from school. During this period, Dara also felt a lack of motivation for self-study, which was subsequently revealed in the Matura examination: *'I pulled out a question that we didn't even really like discuss, it was one of the last questions, specifically it was about business accounting, which we were supposed to discuss just in that half term and in that part of the year when we were like closed in at home, the schools were closed, so there the preparation was kind of miserable in general, and I didn't really like do the self-study well in that sense.'*

As the quotation shows, Dara attributes her failure to her own failure in preparation, which she underestimated on the basis of her lack of motivation to learn: *'It was my fault too, I really couldn't get myself to study. I didn't really get around to studying for my Matura examination until like that spring.'* In her first attempt, her preparation for the Matura examination was not started well in advance, which affected the amount of material learned. In her failure at the remedial term, underestimating the necessary preparation at the expense of the actual work again came to the fore: *'I told myself that for that one subject it is like enough for me if I worked intensively on it, unfortunately it then got complicated in the work, so I stayed there for a week and a half longer than I had planned.'* Thus, as Dara confirms, work responsibilities that are a source of some extra income can affect motivation and also the time that can be devoted to preparing for a remedial attempt.

Dara filled the period between attempts with various part-time jobs that were secured in the employment of family members, which made it easier to find work and employment. Family support appears to be crucial in this respect, as it makes it easier to find part-time work even without having completed secondary education. At the same time, according to Dara, it is evident that a certain financial independence can influence motivation for further learning: *'So I thought also for that reason and the fact that before the Matura examination that year between the first and the second and third attempt, I started working and I think that a lot of students who start working after Matura examination and get used to having money, they don't really want to after that and this was kind of my case a little bit.'* Financial independence, however, did not affect Dara enough for her to underestimate preparing for another attempt again. Based on the previous experience, there was a change in her approach to preparation, which for the second attempt became more structured and longer term. Dara's aunt played a key role in this phase, tutoring Dara twice a week: *'We actually, we started to study it that October, after I failed the Matura examination in September. From that October, we, at the first meeting, we calculated just how many hours we needed for each question, roughly how it should go.'* The tutoring in this case was specific in that the family member was professionally involved in the issue, so there was no need to seek external entities, making the support appear more accessible.

In terms of the instrumental support that led to passing the exam, the aunt who organised, managed, and led the tutoring played the crucial role: *'So, especially the aunt who took it upon herself to tutor me, she really did a great job with me.'* The tutoring took place twice a week and had clearly defined rules and lesson plans, as Dara added: *'Well for about three quarters of the year if I spent there, where I would go to her for tutoring twice a week for two hours, she was just uncompromising: So you sit down and we're going to study, so, so she helped me a lot in that.'* The directive, rule-based approach was clearly perceived by Dara as beneficial. Another level of support consisted of her parents, who provided space for learning by not putting pressure on her for the household chores. The emotional support Dara felt from her boyfriend after her first failure was also important: *'I probably wanted a little bit of support from that family that just didn't come. It was more the other way around, where I really... my boyfriend probably helped me the most.'* Families may express some form of disappointment over the failure, which can lead to a deepening of negative emotions; partners may reflect on the situation with more distance and provide emotional support that offers some understanding in contrast to the family's discontent.

Support of an almost directive nature from family and a close social environment eventually led to Dara's successful completion of the Matura examination. Obtaining a Matura secondary school certificate allows for university studies and a transition to the labour market; it also becomes an important experience to build on in life, as Dara noted, *'thanks to all this, I realised that what I don't earn, I just don't have. And that I just have to get myself to it and start doing something with myself.'* The approach of the people around a repeatedly unsuccessful examinee has an important influence on their future direction, motivation, and preparation.

DITA

Dita's story illustrates the case of a repeatedly unsuccessful examinee who had the support of her surroundings and made a conscious and reasoned choice of a field of study in secondary school that turned out to be wrong. Dita's ultimate success was due to a specific change in her approach to learning that allowed her to succeed without the usual preparation. Dita did not identify with the school or the field. She fulfilled all the requirements of the Matura examination, including vocational subjects, but failed in the oral part of the Czech language exam. At the root of the problem was an inappropriate career choice, which caused a disconnect between educational experience and personal goals and interests. This translated into punishment for poor performance from a teacher.

Date of the first Matura Examination (ME) attempt:	2020
Type of secondary school at which the first ME attempt took place:	secondary technical school
Region in which the first ME attempt took place:	South Moravian Region
Failure in the common part of ME:	Czech language: oral part
Failure in the profile part of ME:	–
Number of unsuccessful ME attempts:	2
At the end of the research, the respondent was in ME:	successful

4.4 Dita's story:

MIXING PERSONAL ACADEMIC INTERESTS AND SCHOOL DUTIES

At the end of her secondary technical school studies in gastronomy, Dita failed the Czech language part of the Matura examination twice. In all other subjects she succeeded the first time. A change in her preparation strategy, namely the realisation that there was no need to read the compulsory literature if a filmed version was available, led to her success on the third attempt. Thanks to living with her mother and occasionally helping out in her father's business, Dita was not economically deprived. She had acquired considerable scepticism towards her field of study, especially during practical lessons and part-time jobs, and she did not want to pursue it. She saw her immediate future somewhat vaguely and based it on her talent for foreign languages and her desire to spend some time working abroad.

When choosing a secondary school, Dita considered both Matura and non-Matura studies, so she applied for two schools; when she was accepted, she decided to take on the one with a Matura examination. The choice of the field of study was determined by the vision of practical employment in her father's companies, so she chose between the two options of training as a cook. When it came to the choice of a particular school, her parents exerted a great influence. *'I didn't even choose it so much as my parents did. They said "They have a chef there, it's quite renowned for those hotel chefs, like the studies."'* Dita didn't develop a relationship with the field during secondary school. The conflicts with chefs during practical training in hotel kitchens left her with a number of unpleasant memories. *'He started yelling at me so much that I started crying. I was really, like, crying, and I'm like, "I'm sorry, but this is the first time the supervisor just isn't here. If she was here, then yeah, I'll just do it her way." Well, really like the swear words were going around and stuff.'* Based on these experiences, Dita did not seriously consider a permanent job in the field afterwards, *'I got experience from it and like, as a very last resort, yes, but that I would want to go back there, not at all. The stress that's there, the people, the chefs were always completely, it was impossible. So I would love to not go back there.'*

Dita's academic interests clashed with her schoolwork. *'I started watching Japanese series, I like them. So I started with Czech subtitles, but then I switched to English subtitles. From Czech books I switched to English books, from Czech films to English films. (...) And so we were good at English, but then the teacher got annoyed because she had to deal with the slower ones, and we had nothing to do there. And so we were like, "Well, okay. We've already written it, so I don't know – are we going to be quiet? Are we going to be on our cell phones? And we'll do our own thing." Well, she just couldn't... So she started, "Don't be on the cell phones," and that. So we just had nothing to do. We were just sitting there, and we were like quietly trying to talk. Or playing noughts and crosses or something... So the teacher started getting more and more angry (...). So after that, even the English got a little bit uncomfortable.'* This form of punishment for performance also contributed to Dita's problematic relationship with school.

Dita did not identify with her field of study or with the school, her relationships with her classmates were not ideal, and eventually problems with attendance emerged: *'I shouldn't say that! Well, I just couldn't do it at all... Like mentally... Classmates... You have some good friends there, just even though those friends are there, you didn't want to be there. I'm really like... So I was having trouble not going there.'* Dita repeatedly mentioned psychological and relational problems, including her relationship with her parents, but she never addressed them with professionals; in retrospect, she reflected on whether this was a mistake. Despite these difficulties, Dita moved smoothly through the entire secondary school to Matura examination and considered attending college after the Matura examination. On her first attempt, Dita was proficient in English, economics, and technology, with results beyond her own expectations, and a Czech language text. However, at both the first and second attempts, Dita was unable to answer questions about the compulsory literature in the oral exam because she simply had not read the books in question.

Dita has a background with her mother. *'Because I live with my mum, I am supported, but it is written down so then when I have more money I will pay it back.'* Although her parents were divorced, her father gave her opportunities to earn irregular extra income in his business. After secondary school, Dita also looked for part-time jobs. *'And since I was a cook, I was looking for part-time jobs in fast food restaurants, and I will never do that again! That's... That's terrible. For that kind of money, what all do you have to do there? Simply everybody goes to fast food restaurants. (...) And the work there was terrible, but you needed the money.'* The reason she sought part-time jobs was probably not only for the money, but also to assert her own independence. Dita perceived supportive roles for her family and friends (she was not in a romantic relationship); she repeatedly emphasised her own decisive role in her life. When asked whose support was crucial in passing the Matura examination, she responded: *'Mainly my parents, because, well, they kicked me into it, but otherwise important, I don't mean that in a narcissistic way, but I guess me.'*

Dita took the need to pass her Matura examination for granted, aware that she had one last remedial attempt. *'(...) if I fail, I have nothing.'* She perceived other pathways to obtaining the Matura examination as impractical: *'If I didn't pass this, I might have to find another school, pay for a year to continue on to the Matura examination... but I definitely didn't want to do that.'* Dita also felt supported by those around her in her efforts to pass her Matura examination. *'My whole family was kind of supportive, they were kind of kicking me to make it, "You've got to get through this!" all my family, my friends.'* Above all, however, she perceived that the main responsibility was hers alone. Dita characterised the period between remedial attempts (corresponding to the 2020/21 academic year) as chaotic, partly because of Covid, and partly because of tragic events in the extended family. During this period, she was unable to find a more permanent job and combined part-time work and helping out in her father's company. She saw this part of her life as a wasted time that gave her nothing. The preparation for the third attempt was intense and short. *'A month before the Matura examination I thought I should study, three weeks before I pulled out the binder and about halfway through that third week, I started watching the movies.'* Since Dita identified the reason for her previous failures in her lack of knowledge of the compulsory literature, she constructed an alternative strategy to prepare by watching the movie versions. As she put it, *'I would lose motivation halfway through the first book, so I said to myself, the movie is two hours long, you can do something at the same time and still listen to it.'* To this she added watching instructional videos on YouTube.

When Dita passed her Matura examination on her third attempt, a year later, she started post-secondary studies at a language school. The intention to study Japanese did not work out, because this language was not available, so the choice fell on Italian. Dita's other life plans were vague; she stated that her plans do not work out anyway. She saw her future intersecting her passion for foreign languages and travel and decided to go to Germany as an au pair in the near future. She had no other plans.

Dita's story was characterised by a disconnect between educational experience and personal goals and interests. Her choice of major and secondary school led her to a school with which she did not have a positive relationship and to study a field with which she did not identify. She progressed through school without any major problems, although she was absent and her relationships with teachers were slightly conflicted. At school, Dita was unable to use her strength, which was her love of foreign languages; on the contrary, her head start in English, to which the teacher did not respond, was turned against her. During the year that she lost by retaking her failed one sub-part of the Matura examination, Dita reduced her ambitions. She chose post-secondary studies instead of college and continued to seek new experiences rather than a firm anchorage after attaining her Matura secondary school certificate.

DAMIÁN

After failing in his remedial attempt, Damián started working, moved out of his mother's home, and became financially independent. His conscious motivation to pass his Matura examination was the possibility of career growth. He said he was preparing for each attempt. He was supported in this by his family; his mother found him a tutor for mathematics. He was also supported by his colleagues at work; his supervisor gave him time off to study. Despite this, Damián repeatedly failed his Matura examination and remained unsuccessful at the end of our research. Damián did not have to repeat the year, but he had to pass a remedial examination in mathematics. During his studies in secondary school, his class changed class teachers and also the teachers of the Matura examination subjects of mathematics and English. Thus, he did not have consistent preparation for the Matura examination from one or at most two teachers in one subject. Despite this, he chose mathematics as his Matura subject. Damián started working after the second failure, the job was low-skilled but with the possibility of career growth. This was one of the incentives that motivated Damián to achieve his Matura secondary school certificate. Within this story, the external factors that influenced it and also the intrinsic motivation and working with it are key.

Date of the first Matura Examination (ME) attempt:	2020
Type of secondary school at which the first ME attempt took place:	secondary technical school
Region in which the first ME attempt took place:	Moravian-Silesian Region
Failure in the common part of ME:	Mathematics: standardised test
Failure in the profile part of ME:	calculations
Number of unsuccessful ME attempts:	4
At the end of the research, the respondent was in ME:	unsuccessful

4.5 Damián's story:

ALTERNATING TEACHERS

Damián studied at a secondary technical school of construction. At school, he experienced considerable discontinuity in the teaching in the form of frequent changes of teachers and related confusion in the content of the curriculum. This also applied to mathematics, which he chose as part of the common part of the Matura examination and in which he repeatedly failed. He also failed in one of the specialised subjects on his first attempt; he passed it on the first remedial attempt. After the second failure, he started working, signed up for the third attempt, and took tutoring in his spare time. After the third failure, he entered the fourth year of studies in the same field by distance learning and prepared for the Matura examination again. Damián had a diagnosed learning disability (specifically dysgraphia) and was granted extra time during his exams. After his first attempt, Damián started working relatively regularly. He was primarily drawn to passing his Matura examination by the possibility of finally finding a qualified job or taking on a managerial role in the workplace.

The choice of the secondary school was not entirely well thought out. He was motivated by his parents to the field of study, but Damián himself said that he chose a particular school basically by chance: *'Because I was deciding first on an industrial school, for some industrial design and so on, but then I was actually in Olomouc to look at the building school, which was actually the private one, and I wasn't really impressed, so I actually applied there and then to the (city) building school. Well, I was actually accepted for both of them, but I didn't want to go to Olomouc (laughs), so I actually took the one in (city).'* A secondary school close to his home was a reasonable choice because of the commute.

During the course of his studies, Damián did not register any significant indication that he would not pass the Matura examination. His school experience was defined by the rotation of teachers, both as class teachers, who were supposed to support the students during their studies, and also in the Matura subjects: *'Well, and like in that school, like cool more or less, I felt like we were like, like a trial class. We actually had three class teachers in those four years. That was quite a comedy as well, because the first year, she actually, we had a class teacher, she left, then we had another one, she was actually pregnant, so she went on then (laughs), and then we got the worst one we could have, so it was kind of as a punishment, well. Plus, we actually rotated English teachers, we had five of them. And the mathematics teachers the same thing, well. We actually had one for the first two years, he was like great and stuff and then he actually retired. Then in the third year we got, I mean, she barely finished school there and she actually went to teach there. Then that's when I did my maths revision test (laughs) because I absolutely couldn't learn anything like that in that year. I mean, I did. And (laughs) then actually in that fourth year, we got a teacher that we had before in a different subject, so it was like good then, well, thanks to her, I chose to do the Matura examination from maths, which I didn't pass (laughs).'* Damián attributes his maths revision test to the change of teachers, or rather to a particular teacher and her poor quality of teaching.

The discontinuity in the teaching of key subjects seems to have been reflected in Damián's preparation and his final result. Throughout, he had the support of his family, especially his mother, yet he moved away from her after his second failure. He wanted to be independent, which he managed to do, as he found a job and could afford to live independently. Damián also had support at work; his supervisor repeatedly granted him study leave so that Damián could prepare for his next attempts. However, he travelled frequently during his employment, and this affected the tutoring that his mother helped him find. When Damián was at home, he attended regular tutoring sessions, but most of his time was spent away from home, and so preparation was largely dependent on his competence to manage his learning. At the fourth attempt, Damián was again unsuccessful, but he did not explain his failure in terms of his lack of preparation; he looked for an explanation in the conditions of the exam and suggested that the conditions were unfair and allowed other candidates to cheat: *'So the last attempt was very unfair. And then actually... I mean at that school... So there it was like fifty, fifty... Like the ones that sat well, if they got it right, they could copy it down just fine. And the ones that actually... The ones that sat in the front like me, they didn't have a chance...'* Damián enrolled in a distance learning final year course, and planned to complete his studies and pass the Matura examination. He was

still working in the same position, although he found a way to be indirectly promoted even though he did not have a Matura secondary school certificate. However, he perceived that with the completion of his secondary education with the Matura examination, he would be able to achieve the promotion in full and improve himself financially.

Damián's struggle to graduate from secondary school was affected by a learning disability, a problematic school experience, and a lack of competence to learn. Nevertheless, he was motivated by his employment and did not give up on his pursuit of a Matura secondary school certificate.

5

PROPOSED
MEASURES



The following recommendations are based on the answers to the research questions. The proposed measures are based on the empirical data collected; they respond to certain perceived problems that students encounter in the Matura examination and in the process of retaking it. At the same time, it is clear that these measures can be put in the context of other topics that reflect the objectives of education policy as defined in strategic documents with priorities related to, for example, the issue of early dropouts or the format of the Matura examination. We therefore explicitly point to certain synergistic tendencies in the specific measures.

For each proposed measure, a specific sub-intervention is named. This indicates whether the measure is aimed at the school or system level. The system level refers to those measures that are an important part of the educational system and require a broader discussion in the context of the necessary legislative changes for their implementation. The school level includes measures that can be implemented by schools themselves, as they are the responsibility of school principals. Nevertheless, it is evident that even for these measures a unified approach from the central level of the educational system would be appropriate. A distinction is also made as to whether the measure is preventive or interventionist in nature. Preventive measures are associated with efforts to prevent repeated failure in the Matura examination, so their introduction may lead to a reduction in the number of repeating students. Intervention measures are steps that address failure in order to support students in successfully completing secondary education and achieving the Matura secondary school certificate. For each intervention, a brief description of the problem, possible solutions, and synergistic measures are provided.

5.1 Recognition of learning outcomes and flexible learning pathways

Partial intervention (measure)	Modularisation of educational pathways and permeability between secondary education fields
Level and nature of measures	Systemic/preventive
Problem being solved	Students in four-year Matura courses who fail the Matura examination are formally left with only basic education. This result in no way reflects the knowledge and skills they have acquired in the course of their secondary school studies in each subject. Thus, it is not the competences acquired but the absence of a Matura secondary school certificate that is used to assess an examinee's employability.
Problem solution	A possible solution is the introduction of certain milestones within the study that would reflect the knowledge achieved and formally lead to the recognition of learning outcomes. An example could be modularised learning pathways, whereby a student could obtain a professional qualification in a given field after two years of study and a VET certificate after three years. Another possibility is the creation of clearly defined learning units with articulated learning outcomes, the completion of which would culminate in a certificate. This would serve as evidence for the recognition of learning. Sub-evidence of the learning process can also be used subsequently in the development of student portfolios that can highlight the competences acquired. The permeability between the fields of secondary education should also be promoted, so that students have the possibility to change their field of study according to their needs, which will better suit their interest and motivation to study.
Synergy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy of the Czech Republic's education policy until 2030+ • VET toolkit for tackling early leaving

In the event of failure in the Matura examination, the student is left with only a basic education, which does not reflect the knowledge acquired during secondary studies. This is particularly evident with technical schools, when a student fails a standardised test that is perceived as unrelated to their previous study and learning, as the Education Policy Strategy (Strategy, 2020, p. 35) pointed out: 'despite having a basic technical education, they leave the education system with only a basic education degree and no professional qualifications.' Time spent studying can appear to be wasted, as Damián demonstrated: *'It seems to me a waste to actually throw away four years of your life as learning, and then to actually get nothing out of it. So, it's kind of like, I don't know... It's also depressing just going there every now and then, but it's pointless.'* The lack of formal confirmation in the form of a Matura secondary school certificate subsequently leads to students seeking professional employment that matches their basic education, as evidenced by Božena: *'So I had to go to work, I actually joined my mum's company where I actually help her measure different machines. And I also do some part-time cleaning twice, just to have more money.'*

The proposal of the above measure, which would enable obtaining ongoing evidence of a student's acquired knowledge or reflecting partial learning units, is in line with the national Education Policy Strategy 2030+ (Strategy, 2020). In this area, the Strategy aims to create a 'system of units of learning' to enable the acquisition of professional qualifications in the course of education. Another key activity, which relates particularly to technical education, is the so-called flexible organisation of school curricula (p. 108). Flexible modules allow for the recognition of prior learning, as they are constituted as a clearly defined body of learning with the possibility of verification. One suitable tool for recognising learning outcomes is the portfolio, which allows for an authentic presentation of acquired competences and helps to understand them (Cedefop, VET toolkit for tackling early leaving).

5.2 Career counselling as a support tool

Partial intervention (measure)	Promoting career management skills and information
Level and nature of measures	School/preventive
Problem being solved	Failure to pass the Matura examination may be influenced by low interest in the field of study, leading to passivity and lack of motivation in studying and preparing for the Matura examination. After the failure itself, students find themselves in a certain intermediate period when they are forced to seek employment and deal with their new role, which involves dealing with professional, academic, and life challenges. Students feel a lack of information and support in this respect.
Problem solution	Career counselling aims to support students with regard to their studies and career direction. Activities aimed at supporting the student's identification with the field can lead to greater engagement and interest in the field, which can be seen as a kind of prevention of failure in the Matura examination. Career management skills, which are the focus of career counselling, also play an important role after failure in the Matura examination, as they allow the individual to themselves to current opportunities and reflect the needs of the individual.
Synergy	Early dropout in relation to the areas of intervention of the regional action planning (KAP)

In the event of failure in the remedial attempt at the Matura examination, the student loses their status as a student and is forced to find a job that would generate some financial security. The individual is thus placed in a new situation for which they was not prepared and is forced to react to it. Even the parents may not have the necessary information, as confirmed by the respondent Doubravka: *'It's only now, after the second attempt that I actually went to school again in the afternoon with my parents, when we solved what to do and how to go on, insurance companies and things like that, to pay for health, social and things like that, to know what to do and how to do it.'* The school has an important role to play in this regard, which can be supported specifically through a career or educational counsellor to promote student awareness of their options. Thus, the focus should be on the development of career management skills that relate to an individual's ability to analyse and organise career information and make decisions (Sultana, 2012). It is the decision making about next steps and the future that seems to be key at this moment of unfinished transition: *'So I've been thinking a lot about how... What am I actually going to do next, what am I going to do that year when... When I don't even have my Matura examination passed. Like, where am I going to get a job or what am I going to do, if I'm just going to do part-time jobs and just... Am I going to study?'* (Brenda).

The proposed measure focuses on career guidance as a key tool to support students. The role of the counselling service is seen in a long-term perspective, where it leads to the continuous acquisition of key skills, and also in an interventional perspective, where it supports a specific unsuccessful examinee. The proposed measure is in line with the interventions proposed by Cedefop in the VET toolkit for tackling early leaving. Students should be supported in preparing for the transition to the labour market and have conflict resolution skills and communication skills and know how to look for a job or write a CV. A prerequisite for this support is a functioning system of career counselling based on the cooperation of key partners, including schools and labour offices. The effort to promote career counselling is a current challenge, also identified in the Education Policy Strategy 2030+ (Strategy, 2020), which highlights the need for greater involvement of teachers and strengthening of professional guidance capacities.

5.3 Support in coping with the individual needs of the student in the Matura examination

Partial intervention (measure)	Support in coping with test anxiety
Level and nature of measures	School/preventive
Problem being solved	The Matura examination is an important moment that affects the future professional and academic life of an individual. For some students, the importance of the exam can translate into nervousness, anxiety, and stress. Consequently, 'test anxiety' can negatively affect performance during the exam, increasing the chances of failure. In the case of individual repeated attempts, test anxiety may increase.
Problem solution	The goal is to help students manage test anxiety so that their performance does not decrease during the exam. Support may focus on training for test situations or on compensatory techniques to minimise negative symptoms.
Synergy	Unidentified

The Matura examination is an important moment, as it influences the future academic and professional direction of the examinee. The stress of the Matura examination can have a negative impact on a student's performance, where abilities are overridden by negative feelings and stress: *'As soon as the day came, I was so stressed that I couldn't even speak, nothing, so I actually panicked like crazy out there, and I didn't even pass the test'* (Denisa). Especially for repeatedly unsuccessful examinees, the importance of the exam is compounded by the mounting pressure from the expectations of the close social environment, as respondent Daniela pointed out, *'Before I went for the third attempt, actually the whole time I was waiting for the third attempt, of course, again there was so much pressure on me, like from all sides, as far as my parents are concerned, my sister too of course. And my boyfriend. Just everybody, because of course it was the last attempt, if it wasn't the last attempt, I guess... Like it's not okay, it's not, but since it was the last attempt, it was really like now or never, yeah? (...) And I was like freaking out about it too, because of the idea that I should go back again.'*

The importance of the moment can be very stressful for the student, which can also affect performance on the exam itself. As research shows, test anxiety has a negative effect on student performance during the test (Schunk et al., 2014). The proposed measure is in line with the research conducted, which indicated that training focused on self-regulation and controlling negative emotions and thoughts helps to reduce test anxiety (Zeidner, 1998). The given activities should be integrated into the curriculum in order to emphasise the development of personal and social competences across the curriculum (Strategy, 2020, p. 34). Within education policy, the topic is clearly closely linked to student wellbeing.

Partial intervention (measure)	Support for students with special learning needs
Level and nature of measures	School/preventive
Problem being solved	The national part of the Matura examination serves as a state-run, uniform exam that is unified for different groups of students. The needs of students with special learning needs, who are disadvantaged in the test on the basis of their needs, are not sufficiently reflected.
Problem solution	The proposed measure consists of adequate support for students with special learning needs. The Matura examination should reflect the needs of the students in order to fulfil the potential of each student.
Synergy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy of the Czech Republic's education policy until 2030+ • Action Plan for Inclusive Education (APIV)

In an education system that is based on heterogeneity and inclusion, there are many groups of students who have special learning needs, meaning that they need some support to fulfil their potential. However, it is clear from the respondents' accounts that some groups find the Matura examination challenging because of their needs. In particular, the standardised test in the Czech language appears to be problematic in this respect. The first group is made up of students with specific learning disabilities: *'I have dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dysorthography... So I just sort of... And the problem there is that exactly – I write, for example... I don't know... I make a mistake myself, I don't even realise the mistake... I write a sentence somewhere, I don't even know that the sentence was... For example, I missed a letter... Unless I spell it myself. And for me, just the thing that looks optimal, I don't see it. (...) You can't find your own mistake, let alone find other people's mistake. Let alone find a mistake in something where you just can't see the mistake. You can't. And it was like... 'Find the commas, find this...' Now I don't know, it's a long text, you're glad you read it in the time. Let alone, like, looking for mistakes in it!'* (Berenika).

The second group is made up of students with a different native language, like Brenda: *'So I was actually in the Czech Republic for ten years at that time. Eleven. And so I was worried about that because I definitely have some of that feeling in that Czech where I make some mistakes that are maybe terribly noticeable, but I can... Like I don't have the right feeling for it.'*

A fundamental aim of the education policy is to fulfil the potential of every student (Strategy, 2020). Every student should reach their maximum potential and fulfil their abilities in education. However, looking at the setting of the Matura examination, it is evident that the setting of the test is unfair for some groups of students. In the context of inclusive education, a student's failure is not understood as a personal failure, but as a certain barrier in the system that prevents the individual from being successful (Straková et al., 2019).

5.4 Alternative entry into tertiary and post-secondary education

Partial intervention (measure)	Opportunity to be admitted to university if all requirements are met except for a Matura secondary school certificate
Level and nature of measures	Systemic, interventional
Problem being solved	Unsuccessful examinees are admitted to college before the Matura examination but cannot enter the college. Since they are no longer even secondary school students, they find themselves completely out of the education system for a year, and for various financial or employment reasons, many then do not try again to apply to college.
Problem solution	Create a mechanism for conditional admission, whereby an unsuccessful examinee will be able to enter university and will have the option of providing evidence of a Matura secondary school certificate after the third remedial attempt
Sources	The Bologna Process

In the Czech education system, the Matura examination is a prerequisite for entry into tertiary education (Act No.111/1998 Coll.). Specifically, this requirement is formulated in the Act in the following wording: 'The condition for admission to study in a bachelor's or master's degree programme is the achievement of secondary education with a Matura examination.' Unsuccessful examinees have completed all years of secondary education, except for the exit exam from secondary education, which in their case is the Matura examination. However, they can only take the third attempt one year after the first Matura examination attempt, during which time they are no longer students in secondary education and cannot enter tertiary education. For some, a second failure means a change in the originally planned pathway. An example is Dalimil, who was originally going to university, to which he was admitted: *'...all that was left was to provide my Matura secondary school certificate, so of course I didn't provide that and then it spoiled it, just suddenly I did not know what to do next.'*

Such students find themselves in a kind of vacuum between the components of the education system. Thus, because of the failure to provide the Matura secondary school certificate, students who fail the Matura examination but are admitted to university cannot enter tertiary education, even though they have been successful in the admission tests. However, there were individual cases in our sample in which a university admitted a student on the condition of passing the Matura examination in the first year of university studies. Berenika was allowed conditional admission to her first year of college, to which she was admitted before taking the Matura examination: *'Well, it ended up that I was accepted to two schools in the Czech Republic, where they always took five people together, and both of them, so for production, at (School A and School B) And... There, actually, I always called afterwards, like I don't have a Matura secondary school certificate, at (School A) like they said that I just have to have a Matura secondary school certificate, that it is not possible otherwise with them and that it is as solid as a rock, unfortunately. And at (School B) they looked at my results and they said I was like above average for them like interesting, above average like talented. That they would like take me on the condition that of course I had to pass it and I had less than a year to do it.'* So some schools, most likely especially those with talent tests, already allow conditional admission in rare cases. This is done on the basis of a preference of criteria other than the Matura examination. The fulfilment of the conditions on the tertiary side is seen as primary and the exit criterion from upper secondary education (Matura examination) is seen as secondary. At the same time, studying at tertiary level would enable examinees to keep their status as students while not losing the study habits that are necessary to pass the Matura examination. It is an efficient solution for the education system as it does not require the creation of new institutions. Based on these facts, we propose introducing the possibility of conditional admission to university.

5.5 Information support for examinees after a failed attempt

Partial intervention (measure)	Information support for unsuccessful examinees regarding possibilities and alternatives for their future life path
Level and nature of measures	Systemic/interventional
Problem being solved	The lack of information for individuals after a second unsuccessful attempt at the Matura examination about their options in their future life path leads to poorly considered decisions.
Problem solution	The creation of a brochure to inform unsuccessful examinees about their options and the necessary steps to take after unsuccessful Matura examination (e.g., paying insurance, registering with the labour office).
Synergy	Unidentified

Both elementary and secondary schools are managed education systems that provide for the education and preparation of students for their future (Murtagh, 2010). The responsibility for education lies with the school rather than the individual being educated. Therefore, having completed all the years of elementary and secondary education, learners are accustomed to the institution or school being the one that imparts key information to them. However, after the first failure in the Matura examination, the individual loses their student status (according to Law 561/2004, this happens as of 30 June of the year in which that student is unsuccessful in the first Matura attempt) and thus the institutional support. Our research respondents who were guided in a directive and transmissive way in their education reported a lack of knowledge and access to information. Specifically, they did not know what they could do after a second failed attempt and what their responsibilities were. Often, their only knowledge is that they lose their student status with a failed attempt, leading to the need to address health insurance. *'Well, a person, if they passed the Matura examination, they can de facto go to that school that pays that compulsory health insurance, well. And if you don't have that Matura secondary school certificate, you just have to go to that labour office or (silent – does not know)...'* (Bořek).

It is not currently easy to find on the websites of CERMAT, CSI, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, or the Labour Office of the Czech Republic what rights and obligations those who repeatedly fail the Matura examination have. The only information that can be read is the loss of student status. Law 561/2004 Coll. does not allow a student who has successfully completed a year of study to repeat it in the following school year. Our measure in this context is an information booklet that would systematically summarise the options for unsuccessful examinees after a second unsuccessful attempt and inform them of their obligations arising from the loss of student status. This brochure could be used by unsuccessful examinees, career counsellors at secondary schools, labour office officials, and others.

5.6 Educational support for examinees after a failed attempt

Partial intervention (measure)	Support after an unsuccessful attempt: (1) support to prepare and study for a remedial attempt, (2) a remedial examination date in less than eight months.
Level and nature of measures	Systemic/interventional
Problem being solved	If an individual is unsuccessful in the Matura examination, they lose all support from the school and have no access to free educational services, they drop out of the educational process.
Problem solution	Our proposal is to establish 'second chance' institutions. One of the aims of these institutions would be to help those who are repeating the Matura examination to prepare for it and to give them a second chance to succeed in the exam. The 'second chance' institutions would aim to systematically support the preparation of individuals for the next exam date. In this context, we propose the addition of an 'autumn Matura examination' date, which would shorten the current eight-month wait (autumn to spring) for unsuccessful examinees.
Synergy	Unidentified

If an individual is unsuccessful in the Matura examination exam, they lose their student status and institutional support, and it is up to the individual's ability to self-regulate and possibly help those around them to apply and prepare for further attempts. After the first failure in the spring and after repeated failure (usually in the same year) in the autumn, the individual must wait five or eight months, respectively, to access the next subsequent attempt. During this time, therefore, they have no institutional support in systematic preparation. The exception is private preparatory courses, which are fee-based. It is precisely the absence of institutional support that appears to be risky, based on our research, and the results of our analyses repeatedly show that in this 'in-between period' the ability to self-regulate and the intrinsic motivation of the individual to prepare for the exam is decisive. Few of our respondents attended private preparation courses, either because of financial or time constraints. It was also characteristic in this 'in-between' period that our informants did not have a skilled job, as (in most of our cases) they had not completed secondary education. Alternatively, they were at home, unemployed, not looking for a job, and 'waiting' for the next possible remedial term. In both cases, however, there was a noticeable loss of institutional and systematic support. Therefore, our informants often tried certain methods on their own that could possibly help them in preparing for the exam (Dvořáková et al., 2021). At the same time, they often lacked the necessary motivation to self-regulate their own learning: *'I enjoyed learning, I even liked studying. I was even surprised myself that I like to learn, but now... I don't even want to go to that school, I only go there now to have it. I just want to pass the Matura examination and hopefully I'll do well, but other than that I don't have the motivation anymore. (...) So I've been like angry with school and everything. And the third attempt... Well, I was like, the second attempt, I said to myself, it's OK. But now I really didn't want to, and my parents were telling me it was no big deal, I'd just apply and give it a shot. And I didn't even want to do it anymore'* (Božena).

One of the strategic objectives of Strategy 2030+ is to 'enable the maximum development of the potential of children, pupils and students' (p. 5). This is one of the goals set internationally by the United Nations in its fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), which focuses on education. The implementation of both the 2030+ Strategy goal and the SDG 4 sub-goal should prevent early school leaving. We propose the establishment of 'second chance' institutions that will aim to systematically prepare repeatedly unsuccessful examinees for their next attempt. This will enable unsuccessful examinees to attend a course, continuously preparing themselves and increasing their chances of success on their next attempt and thus reducing the dropout rate. At the same time, these courses could be attended by people who are returning to study after many years and wish to complete their secondary education with the Matura examination. For such cases, we propose that a map of these institutions be produced at the same time to increase their accessibility to potential students.

5.7 Supporting the quality and continuity of the school's pedagogical work in teaching Matura examination subjects

Partial intervention (measure)	Pedagogical leadership focused on learning outcomes Qualified, staff-stabilised teaching of Matura subjects
Level and nature of measures	School/preventive
Problem being solved	If a secondary school student experiences a change of teachers for the Matura subjects and the associated changes in teaching methods, the preparation for the Matura examination lacks quality and continuity. Students also negatively perceive the uncoordinated efforts of teachers, or even the various types of conflicting pressures to which teachers subject them.
Problem solution	The basis of the proposed intervention is to achieve qualified, staff-stabilised teaching of Matura subjects. Of course, this is not realistic without pedagogical leadership oriented towards learning outcomes.
Synergy	Inspection activities of the CSI

The statements of examinees mirror the problems characteristic of the education labour market, as reported, *inter alia*, by the CSI (2022). The CSI indicated a high level of teaching without qualification. It is significant in secondary education in Matura subjects and is even among the highest in foreign languages and specialised subjects. Foreign languages and specialised subjects are taught in one third of schools (33.0% and 30.7% respectively) by teachers without qualifications; there are also problems in the teaching of mathematics and Czech language (22.3% and 11.2% respectively). The situation is slightly better in secondary general schools than in secondary technical schools.

The qualification was not as strong a theme in the examinees' statements because they were probably not aware of it. By contrast, they strongly considered the turnover of teachers and the associated discontinuity and fluctuating quality of teaching, as evidenced by Damián's testimony: *'Plus we actually had English teachers changing, we had 5 of them. And the maths teachers, well, it was the same. We actually had one for the first 2 years, he was like great and stuff and then he actually retired. Then in my third year we got, I mean, she barely finished school and she actually went to teach there. Then that was when I did my maths revision test (laughs) because I absolutely couldn't learn anything like that in that year. I mean, I did it then. And (laughs) then I actually in that fourth year, we got a teacher that we had before from another subject, so it was like good then, well, thanks to her I chose to do the Matura examination from maths, which I then didn't pass (laughs)'* (Damián). Changing teachers without ensuring continuity and pedagogical continuity in the reflection of unsuccessful examinees is a significant determinant of failure in the Matura examination.

Our conclusions based on the testimonies of repeatedly unsuccessful examinees are compatible with the findings of the CSI. The Annual Report (2022) mentioned shortcomings in 'the active management of pedagogical processes, in regular monitoring and evaluation of the school's work, including the adoption of effective measures to improve the educational results of students...' (2022: 108), and also noted the insufficient activity of subject committees in, among other things, supporting students at risk of 'school failure and failure in the Matura examination and the final examination.' Specific measures are formulated by the inspectorate on the basis of inspection activities in secondary schools that show high failure rates in the common part of the Matura examination. (These measures are, unfortunately, not widely and effectively implemented.)

The basis of the proposed intervention is to achieve qualified, staff-stabilised teaching of Matura subjects. In this area, it is desirable to 'strengthen the quality of teaching staff, with an emphasis on teaching by qualified teachers, strengthening peer supervision, and providing feedback', according to the CSI. Of course, this is not realistic without pedagogical leadership oriented towards learning outcomes and prevention of failure in studies and in the Matura examination. The school leadership has dedicated organisational structures (subject committees) for this purpose. The issue is, of course, personnel and financial resources.

5.8 Unification of the approach of teachers of Matura subject

Partial intervention (measure)	Training in the principles of the Matura examination for teachers of Matura subjects Information campaign for secondary school students on the principles of preparation for Matura examination
Level and nature of measures	Systemic/preventive
Problem being solved	While some students experience regular preparation not only to pass the Matura examination academically but also in terms of testing principles, others do not receive such preparation and find the Matura examination more difficult. This can broaden the gap in their results and lead to failure for technical rather than performance reasons.
Problem solution	It is desirable to ensure that teachers, the school, and other institutions involved, incl. CERMAT, provide students with uniform information on the process, principles, and rules of the Matura examination. This can be ensured through training for teachers and direct communication with secondary school students.
Synergy	Unidentified

Interviews with the informants in our research showed that the common part of the state Matura examination in particular was becoming problematic for them to a large extent. From various sources, often from their older colleagues, examinees got an idea of the content and form of the exam that did not always correspond to reality. Neither the school nor the teachers provide the whole picture of the complex components of the Matura examination. In her testimony, Brenda reported that the teacher emphasised preparation for only some parts of the Czech language exam: *'For the Czech language, we did a lot of preparation for the compulsory literature, we mainly discussed analyses, we often wrote essays. And for the standardised test, we basically prepared for two or three hours, when we... I mean specifically we did the standardised test. That we tried to write it at school. And so we didn't really have that, because the teacher said you can't really fully prepare for it. That there's a certain amount of knowledge over a period of time, that of course every exercise can be practiced. And that's just up to us. Let everybody focus on what we're not good at.'* The teacher focused only on a part of the Matura examination; the other components, in this case the common part of the Czech language Matura examination, were left out of the preparation. From the testimonies of unsuccessful examinees, it appears that teachers perhaps even perceived the belief that the teacher's task was not to prepare for the nature of the exam as evidence of the quality of their work.

Unsuccessful examinees, such as Berenika, find it difficult to find words when they have to comment on the test: *'I would say the standardised test... One of the hardest things in my life... It's really about something else, it's about something completely different than what you're like used to up to now. And it's completely... It's just... They don't teach you anywhere and... I feel like it wasn't even in our, I guess, knowledge? That it's just really... It's so terribly different that you can't...'* A completely different form of the same phenomenon was described by Aneta, who met a retired teacher in her German lessons. The teacher in question apparently had no idea about the actual form of the Matura examination, yet her supportive attitude gave the informant a misconception about what was in store for her: *'The teacher usually told us that no, it would be fine, that she had like led people to the Matura examination and they had passed it. (...) She said just no stress. She always said "keine panik" (laughs). And she was like, we shouldn't stress about it in the first place. That we could pass it all, that we were good at it, so she was like comforting us like that. And she was very nice, like that, but the teaching was like, well, nothing.'*

If it were possible, based on the informants' statements, to describe the common part of the Matura examination in one word, it would be the word 'trick question'. This appeared repeatedly across the respondents' statements, demonstrating a misunderstanding of the nature of the test items in the common part of the Matura examination. The effect of being unprepared for the form of testing in the common part of the Matura examination was illustrated

by Denisa's statement, 'Well, mathematics... I always thought that they put sort of these tricks there, like they put in Czech. So they put them in maths, too. And I thought, "It's calculated like this and like this," but I thought it was too easy to be in a standardised test. So I tried to figure it out again, again through some equations and I don't know what all... But actually after the test I found out that it was really like, it was really simple. And I'm always looking for terrible complexity there. Which I have to change somehow before the next term.' After – often unexpected – failure, the vague notion of the test gradually changes, and unsuccessful examinees begin to seek information more independently and from multiple sources. They find new strategies for preparation that make use of the testing experience they have already undergone.

The basis of the proposed measures in this respect is clear: secondary school students have the right to uniform information about the nature of the Matura examination, especially its common parts. This is the only way to eliminate the inequalities that are created by inconsistent information and the creation of different and inadequate perceptions. To do this, it is necessary to ensure that teachers, the school, and other institutions involved, including CERMAT, provide students with uniform information on the process, principles, and rules of the Matura examination. This can be ensured through training for teachers and direct communication with secondary school students.

5.9 Increasing teachers' sense of responsibility for preparing students for the Matura examination

Partial intervention (measure)	Psychological training for teachers of Matura subjects to increase their sense of responsibility for preparing students for the Matura examination
Level and nature of measures	Systemic/preventive
Problem being solved	Some teachers do not feel that it is their responsibility to lead their students to Matura examination and/or tell students (and entire classes) that they do not have what it takes to be successful at Matura examination.
Problem solution	It is desirable to ensure that teachers are aware of the impact of their actions on students not only in terms of knowledge but also in psychological terms. This can be ensured by strengthening this aspect in the preparation of student teachers and by including specialised further education training courses on this subject for existing teachers.
Synergy	Unidentified

The results of the research showed that in some cases schools did not feel responsible for leading their students to the Matura examination. This was shown in a variety of ways, the common denominator of which is a lack of a sense of responsibility on the part of Matura subject teachers to lead students to (successfully) pass the Matura examination.

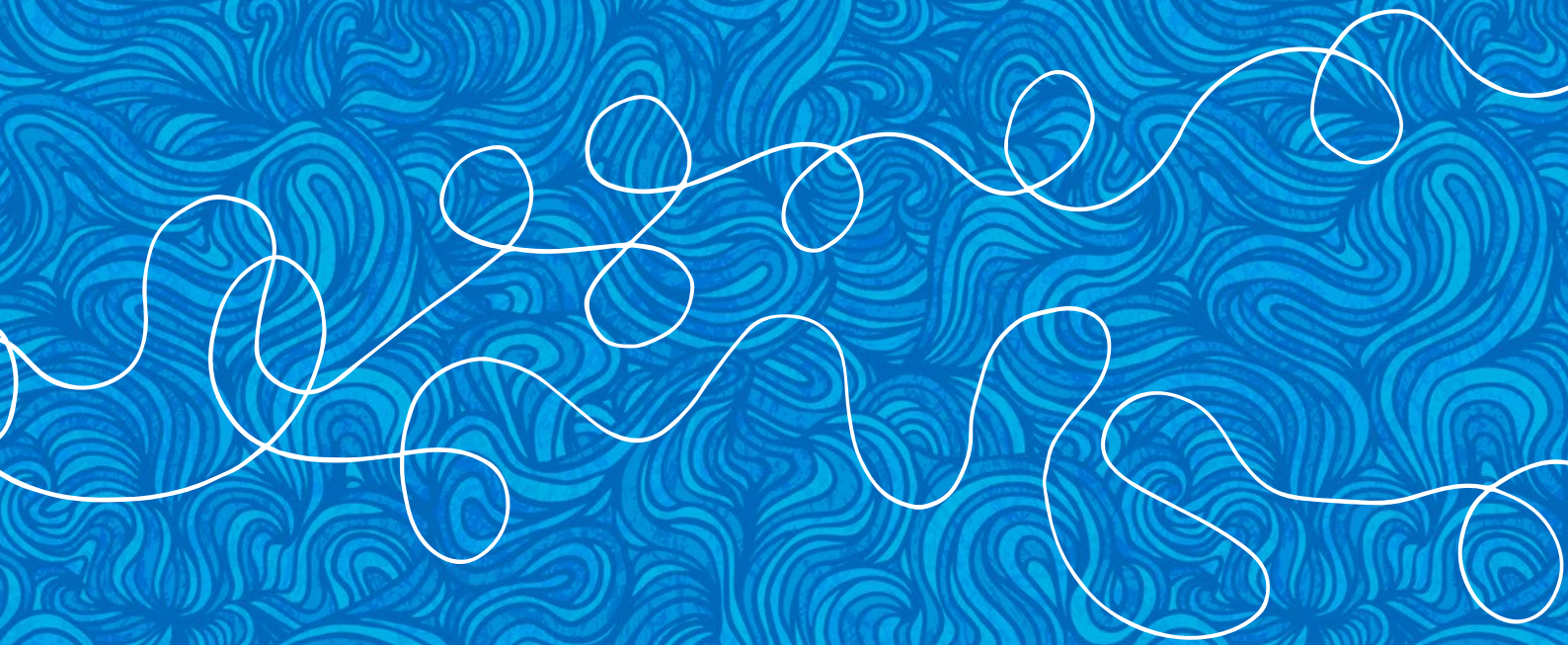
The consequences of this lack of a sense of responsibility can take many forms. They can be seen in a class-wide lack of knowledge of a subject, sometimes associated with repeated changes of the teachers teaching the subject. It has happened that, during the course of their secondary school studies, unsuccessful examinees had several teachers within the same Matura examination subject. '(...) *actually in those four years we had three class teachers. That was quite a comedy too, we actually rotated English teachers, we had five of them. And the maths teachers the same thing. And I guess the rotation was the biggest stumbling block because I graduated from everything but maths*' (Damián). As the quotation shows, sometimes this happened in several subjects at the same time, making the inconsistency of preparation for the Matura examination even more pronounced.

In the area of negative attitudes of teachers, our respondents mainly mentioned being discouraged from taking the Matura examination in the form of questioning their ability to study the Matura examination programme or to pass the Matura examination directly. One example was Bibiana, who described the attitude of the mathematics teacher in the follow-up education: *'We had a mathematics teacher there, she wanted to remove all of us from the follow-up study. She didn't want us to have a Matura secondary school certificate. The first day we came to that class, she said that not everybody has to have a Matura secondary school certificate. We just looked at each other and said, "But we want it and we need it, we want to try."'* This respondent had enrolled in the follow-up school after studying at a secondary vocational school because she wanted to get her Matura secondary school certificate and was determined to try her best to do so. However, she encountered a disincentive to achieve this goal, in the form of the teacher's disinterest in preparing students for Matura examination. In other cases, the teacher communicated a negative message about the student's disposition as a means of pressuring the student's decision, *'Well, mainly she said that if I chose that English, she wouldn't let me take it, so... So I guess, that was it'* (Amálie). The teacher forced Amálie to choose mathematics instead of English by threatening her, which has significant consequences given the rule that Matura examination subjects cannot be changed until all attempts have been exhausted. It turns out that there are teachers in secondary schools who do not believe in the potential of every student to pass the Matura examination. Some express this to individuals, others to classes; both are completely unacceptable and unprofessional.

It seems beneficial to strengthen psychological training, e.g. in the area of working with (one's own) emotions and in the area of pedagogical training, as well as e.g. training focused on reflecting on one's own professional approach beyond the reflection on direct teaching activities. However, the systematic development of a sense of responsibility must begin already in teacher training at the faculties of education. There is a need to be mindful of professionalism, to be aware of the negative expectations that teachers often unconsciously express towards students, and to accept a sense of responsibility for preparing students for the Matura examination sufficiently to pass it successfully.

6

SUMMARY



The main objectives of the research were to gain in-depth insights into the insufficiently researched phenomenon of failure in the Matura examination and its consequences for the future life pathways of the students concerned and to formulate evidence-based recommendations for education policies. The research aimed to investigate the reasons for failure in the Matura examination. Further life pathways of unsuccessful examinees, especially concerning the educational path over two years, were researched.

The report identifies several factors contributing to students' repeated failures in Matura exams. These include inadequate preparation, insufficient time allocation for subjects included in the common part of the Matura examination, and inequities in the education system that disadvantage students at certain types of secondary schools. School-level factors such as teacher turnover, school and teacher pressure to choose a particular Matura examination course, and self-fulfilling prophecies also played a role in students' academic outcomes.

The report suggests that students' experiences of inequity in the education system had a negative impact on their academic outcomes. The students perceived the Matura examination as unfair because it did not reflect the continuous assessment achieved during their studies, and because the result of the Matura examination determined whether the student had completed secondary education. Additionally, the expected learning outcomes of each Framework Education Programme varied across different types of secondary schools, which may have contributed to inequities in the output. These factors may have contributed to students feeling discouraged or disengaged from their studies, which in turn could have affected their academic performance.

The report offers several recommendations for improving support and resources for struggling students. One recommendation is the establishment of "second chance" institutions. These institutions would provide courses to help students continuously prepare themselves and increase their chances of success on their next attempt, thus reducing the dropout rate. The report also recommends producing a map of these institutions to increase their accessibility to potential students. Another recommendation is to focus on career guidance as a critical tool to support students, with the role of the counselling service seen in a long-term perspective, where it leads to the continuous acquisition of key skills, and also in an interventional perspective, where it supports a specific unsuccessful examinee. The report also highlights the need for strengthening professional guidance capacities.

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