

**Juliana Crespo Lopes**



Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR)  
[juliana.crespo@ufpr.br](mailto:juliana.crespo@ufpr.br)

**Jana Stará**



Charles University  
[jana.stara@pedf.cuni.cz](mailto:jana.stara@pedf.cuni.cz)

**Tereza Krčmářová**



Charles University  
[terezakrcmarova@pedf.cuni.cz](mailto:terezakrcmarova@pedf.cuni.cz)

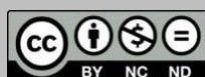
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# RETHINKING ASSESSMENT IN TEACHER EDUCATION: MENTAL HEALTH AND NEW EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

## ABSTRACT

This action research in education discusses the relationship between learning assessments and students' mental health, focusing on a Teacher Education course at a university in the Czech Republic. Institutional and relational practices are identified to foster better assessment opportunities.

**Keywords:** Teacher Education. Learning Assessment. Mental Health.

## REPENSANDO A AVALIAÇÃO NA FORMAÇÃO DE EDUCADORAS/ES: SAÚDE MENTAL E NOVAS PERSPECTIVAS EDUCACIONAIS

## RESUMO

Esta pesquisa-ação discute sobre a relação entre avaliações de aprendizagem e saúde mental de estudantes, focando em um curso de Formação de Professores de uma universidade da República Tcheca. São identificadas práticas institucionais e relacionais para fomentar espaços de avaliação mais adequados.

**Palavras-chave:** Formação de professores. Avaliação de aprendizagem. Saúde Mental.

## REPENSAR LA EVALUACIÓN EN LA FORMACIÓN DE EDUCADORES: SALUD MENTAL Y NUEVAS PERSPECTIVAS

## RESUMEN

Esta investigación-acción analiza la relación entre las evaluaciones del aprendizaje y la salud mental de estudiantes, centrándose en un curso de Formación del Profesorado en una universidad de la República Checa. Se identifican prácticas institucionales y relacionales para fomentar espacios de evaluación.

**Palabras Clave:** Formación de educadores. Evaluación de Aprendizaje. Salud Mental.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Part of an action research (NORTON, 2008) that has been conducted since the beginning of 2021 at Charles University (Prague), this article brings the unfolding of the research after institutional and pedagogical interventions. The research aims to improve the system of students' final assessment in the Teacher Education course for Primary Education which, in the country, includes the master's level and has a total duration of five years.

The culture of Final Exams at the end of undergraduate and/or master and doctoral degrees is widespread in different European countries. Some countries carry on Final Exams in specific undergraduate/masters' courses such as Health and Law; in other countries the Final Exams comprehend all courses (EURYDICE, 2022). Moreover, there are regions that demand two exams for Teacher Education: one at the end of the course and another at the end of an initial teaching period (UNIVERSITÄT LEIPZIG, 2022). On the other hand, there are countries such as Brazil that only require approval in all disciplines and, when applied, in the defence of the monograph for granting the degree (SOUZA, 2020).

The Czech education system has undertaken a modernization process over the past decades. Because of new knowledge produced in Pedagogy and related fields, as well as changes in society, Faculties of Education faculties are trying to innovate their curriculum content, organisation, and internal processes (TOMKOVÁ; SPILKOVÁ, 2019). One tendency is a reflective approach, manifested for example in the use of portfolios in the study and at the FSE (TOMKOVÁ, 2018).

Still, there are aspects that pose challenges to the Czech educational context. School assessment is one of these points that demand more attention and renewal (SANTIAGO *et. al.*, 2012; STRAKOVÁ & SIMONOVÁ, 2012). From the end of secondary school to the end of doctoral studies, students in the Czech Republic undergo a Final State Exam (FSE). Culturally, the FSE are normalised as negative but necessary moments. The stressful experiences of the FSE are shared by students at Czech universities regardless of social, cultural or financial backgrounds (ŠEVČÍKOVÁ, 2015). Furthermore, good preparation for exams and even peer support did not contribute to decrease the experienced stress. On the other hand, optimistic feelings towards exams are directly related to decreased stress (JERÁBKOVÁ, 2016).

As all Higher Education programmes in the Czech Republic, the Primary Teacher Education programme has the FSEs, which, in the case of the researched institution

(LOUDOVÁ STRALCZYNSKÁ; STARÁ; UHLÍŘOVÁ, 2022) include oral exams of the four major study areas and the defence of the master's dissertation. The aim of the FSE is to test the pedagogical and other professional knowledge of student teachers, as the FSE qualifies them to teach all subjects in primary school (ISCED 1). The content of the state examinations focuses on the content and pedagogical content knowledge of the main subjects taught in Czech primary schools - mathematics, Czech language and literature, and one other primary school subject, which the student can choose from a range of these subjects - foreign language (usually English), music, art, drama or physical education. Within the FSE Pedagogy, students are tested on general pedagogical approaches such as pupil assessment, dialogic teaching, building classroom climate, etc., and on the knowledge of the history of pedagogy and educational theory. The FSE have a long tradition in the Czechia. Very soon after establishing the faculties of education in Czechoslovakia in 1964, the study program Teaching for Primary Schools began to emphasize the pedagogical-psychological disciplines, subject disciplines, methodological approaches and practical experience (*ibid*, 2022, p. 37 - 39) and established the FSE of pedagogy, math education, Czech language and literature education and Marxism-Leninism (the latter of the FSE was replaced by FSE of "specialization" after 1989).

Aiming for an improvement in the FSE process, a research call seeking external researchers was opened at Charles University for the Department of Pre-Primary and Primary Education in the Faculty of Education. The research focus context was the Pedagogical FSE for Primary Education teaching degree.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

This research was the first on the department to seek for student feedback about the FSE. More than the research purposes, it inaugurated a new moment where the faculty is interested in students' opinions to make changes accordingly. The qualitative Action Research (NORTON, 2008) has already gone through four stages:

(1) Individual and semi-structured interviews (BROWN; DANAHER, 2019) with eight students and five examiners of the Primary Education FSE in 2021. The students were interviewed at two moments, in the weeks before and the days following the pedagogical knowledge exam.

(2) Changes based on the initial interviews: Offer of a course about the Portfolio, which is one of the materials that can be used in the exam; Systematization of information

about the exams, sent by e-mail and made available on the faculty's website; Raising examiners' awareness about the students' perception of the exam; and online session (synchronous, but with a recording made available) to solve students' doubts.

(3) Individual and semi-structured interviews with eight more students in 2022, also in the moments before and after the Primary Education exam.

(4) Survey in 2022 about study practices and perceptions about the FSEs with students immediately after the exams, through an anonymous online questionnaire for the areas of Czech Language and Literature Education, Mathematics Education, and Pedagogy. The specialization area was not included because there is a reduced number of students that pass individual FSE specialisation. Out of the 57 students who took the FSE in the summer semester of 2022 in these different areas of Primary Education, 49 answered the survey, which comprises 82% of assessed students. The questionnaire had 9 questions for each of the areas. Of the 9 questions, eight were Likert scale and one was multiple choice. The students also answered two open-ended questions about the FSEs in general and an extra comments box.

The students interviewed in the third stage had access to all the actions to improve the evaluation process carried out during the second stage. The new interviews sought to verify the effectiveness of the actions, as well as to investigate which other interventions are necessary for the continuity of the research.

All interviewed participants signed an Informed Consent Form, and the research was approved by the institutional Ethics Committee. The interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes and were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed according to the Thematic Analysis (NORTON, 2008).

### **3 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis and discussion will be combined to better show the process of the research. The interviews of 2021 will be discussed only in terms of background for the research, all the quotes brought here are from 2022, either from the second round of interviews (identified with initials) or from the surveys (anonymised).

Two issues about the FSE stood out in the students' answers: psychological suffering and lack of information about different aspects of the exams. Both issues were interconnected, as the lack of information increased feelings of stress, insecurity, and fear.

### 3.1 Interventions after the interviews in 2021

Based on issues raised, as well as suggestions from the interviewees, a series of interventions were formulated and put into practice. The first of these was to continue and finalise the process of formulating criteria for the Portfolio. Understanding that assessment may be a learning opportunity, the existence of well-defined criteria for the assessment processes is of utmost importance for the knowledge construction process. Knowing what are the main aspects that will guide their learning assessments encourages students to study based on the definitions presented (VIRTANEN; TYNJÄLÄ, 2019).

Two sets of criteria have been defined for the Portfolio. The first set presents, in checklist format, the conditions of presentation and structure for the acceptance of the Portfolio. Ten items were listed, of which at least seven need to be fulfilled. The second set of criteria refers to items that contribute to the quality of the reflections contained in the Portfolios, since one of the main reasons for non-acceptance was related to the inexistence or low quality of the reflections. Each of the seven items presents a four-point Likert scale: always, frequently, rarely and never. To be approved, Portfolios need to have at least five of the seven items configured as "always" or "frequently". Both sets of criteria were based on the design of detailed assessment rubrics with quality descriptors (DAWSON, 2017). It was also intended to produce rubrics that were self-explanatory and easy to follow to collaborate with student development (GEZIE *et. al.*, 2012).

The two sets of criteria were made available on the Department of Pre-Primary and Primary Education website (KPPP, 2021). Additionally, an elective course on Portfolios was offered. The course had a practical-explanatory nature, in which students had the opportunity to improve writing reflection, produce their own materials, assess colleagues' materials and ask questions about all aspects involved in the construction of a Portfolio and its use in the FSE of pedagogical knowledge. Learning is more effective when carried out through more participatory approaches (HSBOLLAH; HASSAN, 2022; GIL-DOMÉNECH; BERBEGAL-MIRABENT, 2020), thus the importance of combining explanatory criteria with opportunities for self-production, and learning-in-action.

To ensure that information about the FSE was shared and accessed, an e-mail was sent to all the students. This e-mail not only contained practical information about the exam day, criteria for the Portfolio and contacts for support, but also sought to establish a more human, welcoming and reassuring contact. An important aspect of this research is that the students interviewed in the first moment of the research had spent the last academic year in remote academic activities, due to COVID-19. The lack of human

contact, hallway conversations and even the routine of a pre-pandemic world brought adversity to students as well as teachers (GUNDIM *et. al.*, 2021). The students who accessed the course on the Portfolio had returned to face-to-face classes that semester and were also distant from the University. Thus, email was constituted as a practice of contact and care.

As a final informative measure, an online session was held in which graduates presented their portfolios and a teacher from the Department answered students' questions. The doubts were initially about the portfolios, but students used the opportunity to also ask about the FSE in general. The session was recorded, and the video was made available on the Department's webpage.

Finally, a meeting was held with the Department's examiners to present the results of the research to date. The aim was to humanize the test, as well as to establish the FSE as an opportunity for learning and exchange. By establishing a good atmosphere in assessment contexts, the chances of students being more successful in the examinations increase. This is true even for students with good general performance, since stress and other negative feelings can lead to failure (JEŘÁBKOVÁ, 2016).

### 3.2 Psychological suffering

Topics about psychological distress regarding the FSE of Primary Education (pedagogical knowledge area) were mentioned with less or more emphasis by all the students and all the examiners in 2021. It is important to emphasise that reports of psychological distress related to the FSE of pedagogical knowledge were more prevalent among the students in the first interview, before the exams.

The diminish in psychological suffering, specially before the Pedagogical FSE was the first important change found in student's quotes. All of the eight students interviewed in 2021 mentioned psychological suffering towards the Pedagogical FSE. In 2022, five students mentioned stressful feelings regarding FSE in general, but not regarding the pedagogical FSE itself, as it can be seen in the quote below:

Because when we are doing the FSE we are full of stress, and we are not able to show what we really know and how we are as teachers. I am the person who is really full of stress in exams like this and I think I am not able to show who am I as a teacher. [MV]

The same student also mentioned the online session and the portfolio course as actions that helped mental health towards the FSE: "It [portfolio course + online session] was really helpful; I think I am calmer." [MV]

Two students mentioned good feelings towards the Pedagogical FSE, and there was no specific negative mentions to it. One student mentioned she was feeling better about the Pedagogical FSE in comparison to other students because of the Portfolio:

And I think that the portfolio is better for the teacher who is examining us and also for the students taking it. I have a better feeling about it than other FSEs, I am less worried about the Pedagogical FSE" [VV].

And there was one positive mention to it, by a student who was feeling overwhelmed by the FSE in general:

I am afraid that the psyche will not work well and I will not be able to speak, darkness will come in my mind. And I won't know, I won't be able to speak. I'll get stuck and nothing will work. [...] I'm actually quite looking forward to pedagogy FSE [KH]

In the questionnaire survey, students undergoing the FSE were asked to provide recommendations for students who are going to take FSE and for examiners. Of the 50 students who answered this question, 18 of them explicitly talked about stress and about how to deal with it. In their statements, they encourage students to spend more time preparing for the FSE, to read the recommended literature, to draw on practical experience, and therefore feel less stressed when they take the exam: "Allow enough time to prepare and don't stress", "It's just an exam. Don't stress and try to understand the material more." In some of the statements, students appealed to lecturers to be more understanding of students being stressed: "Approach nervous students (which are most of them) with understanding.", "Try to calm us down."

University students stress is associated with psychological distress and can bias academic motivation, learning strategies, critical thinking and academic performance (AUSTIN; SAKLOFSKE; MASTORAS, 2010; MORRISON; CONNOR, 2005; TRIGUEROS *et al.*, 2020). Students that are facing very stressful academic situations showed a superficial style of thinking (WEI; LI-FANG; MINGCHEN, 2017). The research showed that University teachers play a significantly important role in supporting students in coping with challenging study tasks through building a supportive climate. In doing so, it appears that students do not prefer too low level of challenge, but rather the fulfilment of decent and meaningful standards (BRÜCKNEROVÁ, 2021). Mature student teachers in Brucknerova's

research assume that their university teachers have expert knowledge. However, what makes them quality University teachers is their ability to listen to their students and their helpfulness to them.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that psychological suffering is still considered to be something normal to be experienced by students at the Final State Exams, as we can see at these two quotes of interviewed students: “I have already completed my FSE in drama education, so I have a little idea that I won't sleep for a week and I'll be nervous.” (MK) and also “But it is a really stressful situation, and I don't know if there is any way to change it, because as long as it will be state exam, then it will be stressful” (PK).

This understanding may be problematic when related to Teacher Education courses because it normalizes bad feelings towards learning assessments. A specific study with student teachers (ANANE, 2013) shows that test anxiety is prevalent among them. They are worried not only about the tests but highly worried about their self-image. The social construct of testing, as an assessment of learning instead of assessment for learning is a barrier to renewal in educational practices. If student teachers experience both the assessment of learning and the test anxiety which it promotes, it is more likely that they will carry on the same pattern of assessment feeling towards it and issues with self-image. Since Primary Education, children face exam anxiety (MCDONALD, 2001), which may affect their relationship with the school and reduce possibilities of a good performance.

Academic workload and low grades are among the main stressors experienced by students in higher education, alongside with financial issues and relationships (PROSEK *et. al.*, 2022). Professors and university staff tend to believe that the worries related to studies are less frequent than other factors, but this is a misconception (MÉNARD *et. al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the authors discuss about the importance of establishing good relationships between teachers and students, aiming for better mental health and reduction of dropout rates. The risk of students giving up their studies because of academic-related stress is also supported by Pascoe and colleagues (2020), who also cite reduction of academic achievement and of motivation as results of the psychological struggle.

At the survey, students were asked to answer how they did feel during the FSE. Their answers are presented at Table 1:



**Table 1: Students' feelings during the FSEs**

	Nervous	Self-confident	Calmed down by examiners	Stressed	Confused
Czech language	28,6%	6,1%	51%	38,8%	6,1%
Czech literature	36,7%	10,2%	38,8%	30,6%	12,2%
Mathematics	28,6%	10,2%	42,9%	34,7%	10,2%
Pedagogy	21,3%	10,6%	57,4%	34%	8,5%

Although feeling nervous, 57,4% of the students reported that the examiners committee calmed them down during the pedagogical FSE. It was the highest score among areas, with 38,8% for Czech Literature, 42,9% for Mathematics and 51% for Czech Language. Twelve students wrote, in the open questions, positive remarks about the atmosphere during the exam, such as: "I appreciate the ability of examiners to empathize with a stressed student before FSE".

In the interviews in 2022, four students reported good experiences specifically at the Pedagogical FSE, as it can be perceived in the quote below:

They asked questions and I responded, it wasn't like we would stare at each other without a word. It was nice. And when student didn't know, they asked more specifically. It seemed to me that they were asking questions that you had to think about [PK]

On the other hand, three students reported negative experiences, although one of them emphasized that the atmosphere of the exam was good:

I must say that the exam was not bad, they were really nice to me, and the atmosphere was good. But I got really stressed because I was not expecting it. I felt that I spent so much time in my portfolio and the things that were the most on my portfolio were not even mentioned. My second question was about a music lesson, but I don't even mention music lesson at my portfolio, so it was a bit confusing and I was really stressed because I didn't know how to answer to it. [...] It was more like questions and answers. I don't think it was a dialogue. [MC]

When interviewed after the FSE in 2022, one student explicitly said that she kept being calm for the Pedagogical FSE and another one said the only moment she was nervous was when waiting for the results. On the other hand, it is important to note that four students mentioned feeling stress either right before the FSEs and/or during it and, of those, three situations were in the Pedagogical FSE. The first, related to a situation with peers while waiting for the FSE, and the other two regarding specific issues with the conduction of the exam. It is also clear from the results of the questionnaire survey that students' feelings during FSE are not ideal. Both cases from the interview were already

addressed to the department to prevent similar situations in the future. The results of the survey were presented and discussed during the meeting with the examiners of FSE. The advises for students written by passing students were send to all students applying for FSE in the next term.

At the surveys, there were also comments where students advise examiners to improve communication. The most common topics were related to comments that could injure or make students feel nervous, and about the importance of informing students earlier and better:

It would be good to hear words of encouragement and motivation for further study after the exam, not the other way round to hear that the performance was poor (even though everyone passed) and that would make you a bad teacher.

Do not make a radical assessment of "you should know that" during the exam because it is not productive or motivating for the student's performance during the exams.

Examiners should be aware that if students are writing with the same queries, then awareness is low and more organised meetings need to be done.

These topics were addressed for the new exams in 2023. Also, in the line of preventing future issues, we highlight the importance of establishing a framework for the board of examiners. This would help ensuring isonomy in all exams, something that is needed. Discrepancy among procedures and examiners practices was mentioned both by examiners and students from both rounds of interviews and it is an issue not restricted only to the Pedagogical FSE.

Everyone was really nice. I can say that these examiners were examining at the same level. [...] My colleagues weren't so lucky. [...] It's down to the personal preference of the examiner. It then depends on what they expect from the students. [KH]

We consider that it is important to make to make is clearer both for examiners and for students about the procedures of the FSE. Rubrics are important for students to better self-regulate their studies, but as important as this is the disclosure of information.

### 3.3 Lack of information

The other emergent topic regarding the Pedagogical FSE was the lack of information made available. Students reported not knowing what was expected from them, how long the tests would last or their format. There were two possible modalities for the FSE of pedagogical knowledge: an oral test, and a defence of portfolio. At the oral test,

there was a pre-established list from which questions were drawn by students. On the other hand, at the portfolio, students would answer to questions related to their academical path showed at the portfolio. The interviewed students reported feeling intimidated with the oral test because of its unpredictability (luck factor) and the need of memorization of facts.

The FSE with Portfolio was intended to be a platform for conversation based on representative materials about the students' educational pathway. Although there were some broad criteria defined for the portfolios, students mentioned that there was no criteria or instructions to be followed for its formulation and the material had to be submitted in the period prior to the FSE for approval. If it was not approved, taking an oral test with a draw for topics would be necessary. Students reported searching for information in Facebook groups and looking for explanatory videos on YouTube. Also, in relation to the use of Portfolios in the Pedagogical FSE, there was a delay in the results about the acceptance of the materials, which also caused psychological suffering.

In the questionnaire survey we asked students the question: "Do you consider the information available before the FSE to be sufficient?". Most students considered the information completely or rather sufficient in all the parts of the FSE, even there is a minority of students that evaluate them as completely inadequate, as it can be seen in Table 2:

**Table 2: Assessment of the information about the FSE by students**

	Completely sufficient	Rather sufficient	Rather insufficient	Completely inadequate
Czech language	40%	50%	8%	2 %
Czech literature	42 %	40 %	12%	6 %
Mathematics	32 %	54 %	14 %	-
Pedagogy	44 %	42 %	6 %	8 %

Compared to the first round of interviews in 2021, when seven out of eight students mentioned not having enough information about the Pedagogical FSE, there was also improvement regarding the availability of information. In 2022, out of eight 8 students, four commented on not having enough information about FSEs in general. They recognized the information provided for the Pedagogical FSE and compared other departments with it.

We've received an email [from the Pedagogical FSE] in which it was more elaborated. So, maybe use something from that and write about the whole FSE, because everyone is asking about it. In the seminars we are talking about FSE rather than talking about the theme we should talk about. And maybe if it was on the websites and we knew how to work with it, it would be better [KK]

One student said she had no doubts because she joined the portfolio course and used that opportunity to make different questions about the FSE, even though she didn't submit a portfolio. We highlight one quote from that topic: "Yes, there is a lack of information transfer. Because FSE may not be terrible, but I don't know, I have no information" [SH].

This quote is important because most part of the information students are looking for are related to the design and the process of the FSE. This information can be easily provided and thus promoting a better assessment atmosphere. One of the reasons for the information barrier is a misconception that there should be secrecy regarding assessment items and aims, otherwise it will be "too easy" for students. When tests are difficult there is no focus on the learning process itself because it is designed in such a way that grades will be low. Moreover, this may lead to memorization for the test instead of real learning (PASTURA; SANTORO-LOPES, 2013). Instead of aiming to stimulate students to study because the test will be hard, they can experience assessment as a learning opportunity. Shifting from assessment of learning to assessment for learning (NG; KWAN; LEI, 2020) can enhance student's motivation towards learning the content and also promote meaningful learning.

Out of the eight interviewed students, seven had access to the online session (one student watched the video recording of the online session) and five took the Portfolio course. Both measures were perceived as positive and expressed their satisfaction with them:

They were really helpful. Especially when combined. When we had the course, I was just thinking about the portfolio and creating materials. The online session was later, and it was useful because at that time I had more questions. It was good that there was this time gap between them. [MV]

Definitely I am less stress for the Pedagogical one because I have more information about it. When I was submitting the portfolio, I was less stressed than with the Mathematic because I knew exactly what to put there. I followed the self-assessment, and I was confident that I did my best. [...] That is the big difference between the Mathematics and the Pedagogical FSE. And also with all the others. I feel that I don't know much about them. This is the hardest part about it: we don't know how it is going to be, what to expect and how to be prepared for. [MC]

As can be seen, there is an intrinsic relationship between the two topics that emerged in the interviews. The lack of information generates psychological suffering, on the other hand, the sense of students' security safety contributes to mental health and more meaningful learning and assessment processes.

## 4 FINAL REMARKS

The Action Research is still in process, aiming for improving even more the assessment process as well as the academic relationship between examiners and students. The first innovation efforts were conducted by an external researcher, and it is important to acknowledge the effect of the perceptions of an outsider to start the change process. At the moment, different Departments of the Faculty are engaged in carrying on the research as well as the innovation process.

The discussion with examiners after the presentation of the survey results showed that teachers are not sufficiently aware that students are not always well informed about where to look for information and that sometimes they do not understand the information. Teachers are frustrated that this generation of students sometimes makes strong statements such as "we don't have any information", because they feel the information is comprehensive and sufficient. Work needs to be done to improve communication and provide information to students in a form that is sufficient for them. It is important to highlight that assessments should be dealt as one more opportunity for learning and developing, instead of a moment of mystery and uncertainty that may cause psychological suffering.

With the disclosure of the research results so far, the Pedagogical Department will focus on students' different abilities beyond academical knowledge. It is important to support students' autonomy and self-regulation development. Another course of action will be to focus on social and emotional skills competences to learn and manage stressful situations, including exams settings but also regarding classroom scenarios and relationships with pupils' parents.

As new paths for studies in this area, we suggest case studies about different types of students and their progression through their studies including FSE or other kinds of final assessments.

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