



**UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU**

This is a self-archived – parallel-published version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details. When using please cite the original.

AUTHORS Jan Löfström

TITLE The Finnish Matriculation Exam in History : Are the exam tasks and assessment criteria aligned with curriculum aims?
YEAR 2026

VERSION Publisher's PDF

CITATION Löfström, J. (2026). The Finnish Matriculation Exam in History : Are the exam tasks and assessment criteria aligned with curriculum aims? Teoksessa Gautschi, P., Gibson, L., Nieuwenhuyse, K. v., & Wojdon, J. (2026). Putting History to the Test: History Exams Around the World. Wochenschau Verlag.

LICENSE CC BY

JAN LÖFSTRÖM

The Finnish Matriculation Exam in History

Are the Exam Tasks and Assessment Criteria Aligned with Curriculum Aims?

Abstract

This chapter discusses the Finnish matriculation exam in history with a particular focus on the period from spring 2023 to the present. The exam is analyzed in terms of its congruence with the aims of history teaching in the core curriculum for upper secondary education, the tasks set in the exam questions, and the criteria for assessing students' essays. The chapter also discusses the limitations of the history matriculation exam format in assessing students' skills in acquiring and applying historical knowledge, as well as the challenge of writing assessment criteria at the optimal level of detail. The chapter also discusses the author's experiences in the process of constructing the exam.

Keywords

matriculation exam, upper secondary school, historical literacy, Finland

1. Exam context and an overview of the aims of history education in secondary education in Finland

1.1 Structure of education and the outlines for history education in secondary school

In Finland, secondary education is divided into lower and upper secondary school. Lower secondary school covers the last three years of the nine-year period of basic education, and upper secondary school is the three- to four-year program after basic education, comparable to the French *lycée* and the German *Gymnasium*. After basic education is completed at the age of 15, about one half of the students go to upper secondary school and slightly less than half to vocational education (National Agency of Education 2023). The two educational strands are not entirely separate. Students can cross between them and take an exam that combines elements of the upper secondary school program and some vocational education program. Historically, upper secondary school has been regarded as the more prestigious strand, but some vocational programs are now

very competitive and require excellent academic grades from the applicant (see Espoo City Information 2024).

The curriculum framework, also known as the core curriculum (*opetussuunnitelman perusteet* in Finnish and *läroplansgrunderna* in Swedish), is issued by the National Agency of Education (www.oph.fi), and there is a separate curriculum for basic education (grades 1–9) and upper secondary school. The curriculum provides the guidelines that schools follow in the school-specific curriculum. Comprehensive schools and upper secondary schools are usually municipal schools. There are also private schools that follow the core curriculum but have a school-specific focus on a religious world view or an educational philosophy like the Steiner pedagogy. In the 1990s, deregulation took place in public administration, and some of the earlier structures of control in education were dissolved, like the approval of textbooks by the National Agency of Education (Ahonen 2003).

The current *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education* (2014) and the *National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Education* (2019) are over 400 pages long and cover a wide range of topics, including the basic values that inform how school operates, assessment principles, special needs principles and provisions, and principles for organizing student participation in school. School subjects form the basic structure in both lower and upper secondary school in Finland, hence a central part of the core curriculum are the subject-specific aims, teaching content and assessment criteria. In basic education, the assessment criteria are more detailed than in upper secondary school and were issued separately in the *Criteria for Final Assessment in Basic Education* in 2020.

Although the core curricula are sizeable, teachers have considerable freedom in the planning and implementation of teaching, which has been justified by teachers' advanced academic training. Since the 1970s, teachers have been required to have a master's degree, the rationale being that an understanding of pedagogical theory and the epistemology of their subject(s) make teachers well-equipped to meet the challenges they experience in their work (Salokangas et al. 2019; Niemi et al. 2018; Chung 2023). In primary-school teacher's education, however, it has been argued that the theoretical elements have received too much space in pedagogical studies, hence classroom activities have been relegated to the margins of pre-service teaching practice (Säntti et al. 2023).

In Finland, history is taught in primary school and in lower and upper secondary school. In lower and upper secondary school, it is usually taught by a teacher with a master's in history and 60 ECTS credits in pedagogical studies (see European Commission 2022 for information on the ECTS). Many history teachers also teach social studies, which focuses on politics, economics, sociology and law.

Since the 1990s there has been a shift in Finnish schools towards emphasizing competencies and skills in discipline-specific and cross-disciplinary teaching (Lavonen 2020). Also, in recent years the aims of history education have increasingly focused on skills. Historical thinking skills were also included in the aims of history teaching earlier in the 20th century (Veijola and Rautiainen 2019), but they now have a more prominent place. Changes in the classroom are slow, however: history teachers still often continue to teach content knowledge rather than historical literacy, and they have only slowly adopted the principle of criteria-based assessment that was introduced in the curriculum twenty years earlier (Rantala and Ouakrim-Soivio 2020; Rantala et al. 2020). Teachers find the aims of history teaching diverse, but when assessing students, they tend to give weight to students' historical content knowledge. There seems to be a clash between tradition and the new curriculum, and as Rautiainen et al. (2019; 2020) have argued, the matriculation exam probably has an impact here. Teachers assume that success in the history matriculation exam requires first and foremost excellent content knowledge, thus it is important to focus on transmitting it to students. Norppa (2019) has also pointed out that exercises in history textbooks for upper secondary school imitate the questions in history matriculation exams.

Discussions about history education in Finland were practice-oriented for most of the 20th century, but a more theoretical view began in the 1980s, influenced by British and German research. German and Anglophone traditions have also influenced Finnish research on history education in recent decades (Ahonen 2020).

1.2 Exams and assessment system

There are no mandatory national exams in lower secondary school in Finland, but the National Agency of Education has designed reference exams that schools can use. New, detailed assessment criteria for final assessment in basic education were issued by the National Agency of Education in 2020. Teachers are free to apply the criteria and design their own assessment solutions, and they can use relatively diverse instruments in doing so (Rautiainen et al. 2020). The assessment culture in Finnish schools is described as low-stakes and decentralized (Nieminen et al. 2024). The matriculation exam is an exception: it is a national final test and a "high-stakes test" (Au 2007) in that its result is important for students' chances of entering university studies.

In upper secondary school, assessment takes place in the obligatory and optional courses in the core curriculum. Students' final grades in a specific subject are based on the course grades, but the final grade is of little practical use com-

pared to grades in the matriculation exam. The matriculation exam certificate is now often the criterion used to select students for tertiary education (Kupiainen et al. 2023b). The matriculation exam thus has a dual nature: it is the final exam in upper secondary school, and also the student's ticket to tertiary education.

The matriculation exam is administered by the Matriculation Examination Board, an independent unit in the National Agency of Education. The ordinary members of the Board and the full-time administrative personnel in the Office of the Board develop and implement the exams. The ordinary Board members are part-time and usually affiliated with a university or the National Agency of Education. The ordinary Board members are nominated by the Ministry of Education for a renewable three-year period. They are subject specialists with responsibility for their respective subjects and are involved in constructing the exam and assessing students' essays. They are assisted in exam construction and essay assessment by part-time expert members who are affiliated with a university or a school and recruited by the Matriculation Examination Board.

The matriculation exam includes one mandatory exam in Finnish language and literature or Swedish language and literature, depending on the student's language of study. The student must also take four other exams from specific "subject groups" to ensure they have taken a diversity of subjects. For example, it is not possible to take foreign language exams only: there must also be an exam in mathematics or in some so-called *Realia* subject that includes history, social studies, geography, biology, chemistry, physics, philosophy, religion and health studies. Students can also take extra exams. Each student's exam paper is preliminarily assessed by a teacher in their school, and the final marking is completed by an examiner who is an expert member (see above) of the Matriculation Examination Board.

All exams are written, and the digitization of the matriculation exam in the 2010s made it possible to include more materials, including audio or video materials, in the exam question. However, because the duration of the exam is fixed, there is a limit to how much material it is reasonable to include. As students are not permitted to use the Internet during the exam, they cannot be asked to search for historical sources online. In the exam, materials are provided to the student on a portable memory stick that is used on students' laptops.

The matriculation exam was criticized in the 1960s and 1970s for elitism and obstructing the development of upper secondary school pedagogy (Vuorio-Lehti 2007). However, this critique subsided in the 1980s for many reasons. To succeed in international competition, it was considered important for Finland to be an "information society" with a well-educated population. The exam was also seen as useful for monitoring input and output in the school system: the results

in the exam appeared to show how well schools and the education system were using their resources. This was also a topic of interest in Finland as part of the global neoliberal wave in educational politics (Vuorio-Lehti 2007). The idea of abolishing the matriculation exam has not disappeared, but it has rarely come up in public discussion since 2000.

The Law on Matriculation Examination (*Laki ylioppilastutkinnosta* 2019) states that the matriculation exam assesses whether students have acquired the knowledge and skills included in the curriculum for upper secondary education. When creating the exam, the exam constructors do not need to consider any documents other than the core curriculum. In Finland, exam questions and assessment criteria are often seen by teachers as an authoritative interpretation of the curriculum, and it has been argued that, because the curriculum does not describe the aims of teaching in great detail, the exam constructors effectively define the aims of teaching (Löfström et al. 2010).

1.3 Aims of upper secondary-school history teaching and the history matriculation exam

Like many other countries, in Finland pressure has been placed on history teachers to promote many different aims, like specific cultural identities, historical literacy and understanding the use of history. The current core curriculum for upper secondary education and basic education can be seen as the outcome of many stakeholders' beliefs about the importance of the aims (Marti et al. 2020). The *Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Education* 2019 gives the following aims for the teaching of history, presented here in abbreviated form:

- *Values*: the student knows and understands the diversity of expressions of different cultures; has ability to form a worldview that is supportive of human rights, equality, democracy and sustainable life-style; can act as a responsible citizen supporting these aims; gets experience that increases his/her interest in history and understanding of its meaningfulness.
- *Understanding historical phenomena*: the student knows the central processes in Finnish and global history and can assess their significance and mutual cause and effect relationships; understands the present as an outcome of historical development and a starting point to the future; can analyze historical phenomena and interpret people's activities in the framework of their own time; can put the present and themselves in a historical continuum; understands the principles of constructing historical knowledge that is open to different interpretations.

- *Acquiring and applying historical knowledge*: the student can search, interpret and evaluate different historical sources critically; can construct knowledge about the past using different information sources; can use historical knowledge to form well-grounded opinions and assess how history is used to exert influence in society; can apply historical knowledge to evaluate social and economic challenges and weigh alternative means of solving them in the future.

The core curriculum also provides course-specific aims and contents in three obligatory and three optional history courses. Below is an example of the text provided for the aims and content of the mandatory history course International Relations (HI2) and shows the level of detail in the description (edited and translated by the author):

The aim of the module is that the student:

- knows the basic concepts, operative practices and the most central trajectories of international politics,
- can make use of diverse sources of information and recognize opinion influencing via media in different time periods,
- can analyze the significance of ideologies and competing economic interests in the history of international relations and can assess their impact in the present and in the future,
- can analyze causes, consequences and possible solutions in international collaborative structures and antagonisms,
- follows the media actively and can examine critically international issues,
- can analyze and evaluate the use of history as an instrument in politics.

The main contents are:

The Basics of International Politics

- International politics as a research object and its central concepts;
- Political ideologies and their influence on societies and international relations.

The Europe-Centered International System

- Imperialism in politics, economy and culture;
- The causes and consequences of World Wars;
- The antagonism between democracy and totalitarianism;
- Human rights issues, the Holocaust and other genocides.

From a Bipolar World to a Multipolar World

- Cold War as competition between superpowers and its end;
- The significance and consequences of decolonization;
- Global politics and the changing balance of power.

The students are in their second or third year in upper secondary school when they take the matriculation exam in history. Data from the early 2010s show that the students who took the history exam performed well in the matriculation exams as a whole (Salmenkivi 2013). The popularity of the history exam has been stable in the 2010–2020s. The history exam has been as popular as the physics and chemistry exams, more popular than the geography and religion exams, but less popular than the social studies, biology and psychology exams (Tillonen 2022). Although the majority of upper secondary-school students are female, most of the students who take the history exam are male. In this sense, the history exam is a “boys’ exam”, although not as much as the physics exam, for example (Löfström 2016).

Students’ exam papers are marked using the criteria created by the history exam constructors and are revised after the exam by the history examiners’ joint meeting, which is organized by the Matriculation Examination Board. All the exam questions are essay questions. For each exam question, the criteria list the most central contents separately, and there is also a description of what dimensions are relevant in evaluating essays in general (see section 3.3). Although the criteria provided are brief, as will be seen below, they have not been criticized by teachers, and no demands have come from schools to create more detailed criteria.

If the student believes that an essay has not been marked according to the criteria either by the teacher in school or the examiner in the Matriculation Examination Board, they can ask for a new reading of the essay by two more examiners. In recent years 1% of students have asked that an essay from their history exam be read again. From my observations, it seems that requests for a new reading do not come from students who have failed, but from those who are near the threshold to a higher grade.

The History Teachers’ Association regularly communicates feedback to exam constructors about the exam, and there have also been seminars where history teachers and examiners meet to discuss experiences from history exams (Gunnemyr 2010). It has been found that students’ results in the social studies matriculation exam are correlated strongly with their grades in the social studies courses in school (Kupiainen et al. 2023a). It is likely that such congruence could

also be found between the results in the history matriculation exam and grades in history courses.

Students' grades in the history matriculation exam are the outcome of a two-stage process. Students' essays are marked and given a grade based on the assessment criteria, and when all students have been given their individual aggregate score points, the Matriculation Examination Board sets the grade thresholds for the exam, i.e., the minimum score point for every grade. The thresholds can vary between the years. Regardless of how difficult an exam is, the aim is that the same percentage of students are in a specific grade category and the grade always indicates the same performance (Matriculation Examination Board 2024). This system can be problematic if the number of students in the exam is so small that the performance level in the group may vary significantly at random between the years. This situation is unlikely to arise in the case of the history exam, given that thousands of students take it.

Data from the matriculation exam provide rich opportunities for quantitative and qualitative analyses. To give some examples, research has focused on what affects the popularity of an exam question and why some questions have been less effective discriminators in history exams than others (Löfström and Kaarninen 2012); what gender-related differences are found in the questions students answered (Löfström 2016); and how students structure historical knowledge in their essays in the history matriculation exam (Virta 1995). A number of studies have also focused on the congruence between the matriculation exams in history (exam questions and assessment criteria) and the aims of history teaching in the core curriculum, with special attention being paid to the place of higher-level cognitive processes in the history exam (Puustinen et al. 2020; Rantala et al. 2020; Rautiainen et al. 2019; 2020).

2. Methods of analysis

This paper focuses on the cognitive processes that are targeted in the exam questions and the assessment criteria in the spring 2023 matriculation exam in history. Furthermore, it asks to what extent the exam questions and the assessment criteria are aligned with the curriculum's aims. The analysis is similar to that by Puustinen et al. (2020), who analyzed the exam questions and assessment criteria in the history matriculation exams in 2006–2019. Puustinen et al. applied the theory of textual genres in history writing developed by Martin and Rose (2008) and the taxonomy of cognitive processes by Bloom and Krathwohl-Anderson (Kratwohl 2002). They identified three types of task in the exam ques-

tions: a) describing and summarizing information; b) explaining and justifying knowledge; and c) comparing and evaluating knowledge. There can be more than one task per exam question. Defining the type of specific task depends on the instructions provided for the task, the formulation of the exam question as a whole and the guidance provided by the sources, if any. The question-specific assessment criteria show which cognitive processes the exam constructors saw as relevant in the exam question.

Most of the tasks in the exam questions in the spring 2023 matriculation exam in history can be sorted into the typology provided by Puustinen et al. (2020) or the Bloom-Kratwohl-Anderson taxonomy of cognitive processes with little difficulty. I was involved in constructing the exam, which may have biased how I have sorted and interpreted some tasks as being more ambitious and requiring higher-level cognitive processes than others. As will be seen, the instructions provided in the tasks and the assessment criteria are not always fully congruent with the cognitive processes being targeted. The analysis by Puustinen et al., (2020) provides an opportunity to assess how typical the spring 2023 history exam is when compared with the cognitive processes that are the focus in the history matriculation exams from 2006 to 2019.

The questions in the spring 2023 history exam are organized by time period, geographical area, and historical theme. The questions have the following foci:

- 1) Deserted villages in England in the late Middle Ages (sources included).
- 2) Characterization of the Balkans as “The Powder Keg of Europe”.
- 3) Finnish migration to Saint Petersburg from the 19th century to the 1920s (source included).
- 4) Ancient Romans’ view of the afterlife and its change (sources included).
- 5) Finnish historians’ interpretations of a 16th-century rebellion in Finland (sources included).
- 6) Forms of cultural encounters in an optional non-European region before the 20th century.
- 7) Declaration of Independence and the development of minority rights from the 18th to the 20th centuries in the US (sources included).
- 8) Dictatorships in Europe in the 1920–1930s and the Spanish Civil War (sources included).
- 9) Controversies about the Constitution in Finland in 1918–1919 and the long trajectory of the relations between presidential and parliamentary power (source included).

3. Results

In this section, I analyze the structure and themes in the spring 2023 history exam, the types of cognitive processes required in the tasks, and how congruent the assessment criteria are with the tasks. There are six questions (Questions 1–6) with a maximum of 20 points each and three questions (Questions 7–9) with a maximum of 30 points each. Students were required to answer five questions, including no more than two 30-point questions, and no questions were compulsory. Most questions included historical sources such as written documents or statistical material.

3.1 Regions, periods and the aims of history in the spring 2023 history exam

The spring 2023 history exam has a spread of topics that is typical in the history matriculation exams in the 2010–2020s. Six of the nine questions focus on European or world history and three on Finnish history. Four questions focus on pre-1900 history, four questions on post-1900 history, and one question is about a longer time period, the late 18th to the late 20th centuries. The focus of the questions reflects how the different geographical regions and historical periods have visibility in the history courses in the core curriculum. None of the exam questions cross the line between Finnish and European/world history by putting Finland in a wider perspective.

Three questions focus on political history, three on social and economic history and three on cultural history. This balance between the different fields of history is justifiable, given that two of the six history courses in the curriculum focus on political history, two on social-economic history and two on cultural history. The boundaries between political, social and cultural history are not neat, and an exam question may be connected with more than one course, but at the general level, the spring 2023 history exam corresponds well with the focus of the courses in the history curriculum.

Regarding the aims of history teaching (see section 1.3), the exam questions in spring 2023 focus primarily on aims related to *understanding historical phenomena* and *acquiring and applying historical knowledge*; aims under the heading *values* are less often focused on. The value-related aims are visible in Questions 4, 6 and 7, where the diversity of expressions of different cultures and the history of human rights and equality (see section 1.3) are at the center.

3.2 Levels of cognitive processes in the tasks in the spring 2023 history exam

The tasks in the exam questions focus on a range of cognitive processes, from more basic to more advanced. Some of the tasks may appear easier because they do not require students to use higher-level cognitive thinking. But comparing tasks by difficulty is not simple: difficulty can derive from higher-level cognitive processes or the complexity of the historical topic. Below I provide the questions in the spring 2023 history exam in edited form. In brackets I include the verbs of instruction that highlight the cognitive processes focused on in each question.

- 1) Give a well-grounded explanation why many English villages became deserted in the late 14th/early 15th century. Make use of the attached text document. (Explain)
- 2) Analyze what Otto von Bismarck meant by calling the Balkans “The Powder Keg of Europe”, and assess the aptness of his view in light of 20th-century events. (Analyze, Evaluate)
- 3) Analyze what factors affected the number of Finnish migrants in Saint Petersburg from the late 19th century to the 1920’s. Make use of the attached statistics. (Analyze)
- 4) What was the Ancient Romans’ view of the afterlife, and how did it change with the rise of the so-called mystery cults? Make use of the attached text documents. (Describe)
- 5) Analyze the selected historians’ explanations for the civic uprising in Finland at the end of the 16th century using the attached sources, and evaluate which of them appear the most plausible. (Analyze, Evaluate)
- 6) Using the typology of the historian Urs Bitterli (given in the text), discuss what types of cultural encounters took place in the non-European region of your choice before the 20th century, and why the encounters took the form they did. (Analyze)
- 7) Analyze the ideological origins of the US Declaration of Independence and the development of minorities’ rights in the US from the 1770s to the 1960s. Make use of the attached text and video material. (Analyze)
- 8) Analyze why many European states became dictatorships in the 1920–1930s and why foreign powers and individual foreigners wanted to participate in the Spanish Civil War. Make use of the attached text documents. (Analyze)
- 9) Analyze the controversies on the Finnish Constitution and the different parties’ motives in it in 1918–1919), and assess the aptness of the conclusion

in the attached source, concerning relations between presidential and parliamentary power in Finland. (Analyze, Evaluate)

The verbs of instruction are describe (1), explain (1), analyze (7), compare (1) and evaluate (3). The first two are more basic cognitive processes, while the other three are more advanced. In Finnish-English translations the verb “analyze” is often used when the verb *pohdi* is used in the Finnish text, but the Finnish word is a relatively open-ended word in terms of the kind of cognitive process it pertains to. When used in an exam question, it often relates more to analysis or evaluation. The cognitive processes required in this exam are more often advanced than basic-level cognitive processes. This is aligned with the history curriculum, where more advanced cognitive processes have a central place (see section 1.3).

Using the typology developed by Puustinen et al. (2020), I grouped the exam questions in the spring 2023 history exam as follows:

Question types in the typology by Puustinen et al. 2020	Spring 2023 history exam questions in the typology
Describing and summarizing information	Exam question 4
Explaining and justifying knowledge	Exam questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
Comparing and evaluating knowledge	Exam questions 2, 5, 9

Table 1. Categorization of the spring 2023 history exam questions

In their study of the history matriculation exams in 2006–2019, Puustinen et al. (2020) found that tasks asking students to explain or justify were more frequent than tasks asking them to evaluate or compare, and there were few tasks asking them to describe or summarize. The spring 2023 history exam appears similar. Interestingly, in the social-studies matriculation exams from 2006–2014, advanced cognitive processes were used less often than basic cognitive processes (Ahvenisto et al. 2013). History and social studies are closely related, usually being taught by the same teacher in a school, and the matriculation exams for these subjects are also constructed by the same expert team, but advanced cognitive processes have had a central role in the history curriculum for a longer time than in the social studies curriculum (Löfström 2019).

In the Bloom-Kratwohl-Anderson (2002) taxonomy of cognitive processes, the tasks from the spring 2023 history exam were placed most often in the middle sector (analyze, apply) of the taxonomy, less often at the top (evaluate, create) and rarely at the bottom (explain, recognize).

Most of the spring 2023 history exam questions include sources like texts or statistics that students are asked “to make use of”. As the skills of analyzing and interpreting sources are central to the aims of history teaching in the core curriculum, this exam appears to be aligned with the curriculum. However, it can be argued that students’ abilities to analyze and interpret historical sources are not well targeted in the questions. The instruction “make use of the material” does not explicitly ask students to contextualize the sources or analyze their aims and credibility. Without such a focused instruction, it seems that students often approach the source as an illustration they may comment upon, but do not engage with it analytically (Puustinen et al. 2020; Rantala et al. 2020).

3.3 Connection between the exam questions and the assessment criteria

Dimensions	Failed	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Correct and relevant knowledge; precise use of concepts.	No knowledge that is required in the exam question. The task is misunderstood.	Content is scarce or largely irrelevant. Very inadequate use of concepts. Only a partial answer to the question.	Relatively precise knowledge, related well to the question. Good command of concepts.	Precise concepts and knowledge. Content of knowledge essential and sensibly selected with consideration of the task.
Analytical, logical and well-grounded.	Unstructured, messy. Ungrounded claims.	Little justification of claims made. Weak analysis of the topic. The structure is unclear or catalogue-like.	Relatively good grounds to claims. The topic is discussed logically, despite shortcomings at some places. In some part analytical.	Very analytical touch. Good grounds for the claim, logical and well-argued examination of the topic.
Critical, multi-perspectivist, able to evaluate and apply knowledge	No critical views or sensible evaluation or application of knowledge. No traces of ability to discuss different interpretations or alternatives.	Weak traces of source criticism. Occasional weak traces of multiple perspectives and discussing different interpretations. Ability to apply knowledge faintly discernable.	In some places good critical discussion and interpretations. Some good cases of multiperspectival thinking and ability to evaluate and apply knowledge.	Astute and insightful critical touch. Well-balanced discussion from multiple perspectives. Many cases of evaluating and applying knowledge.

Table 2. General elements of assessment in history matriculation exams

It can be argued that the assessment criteria in the history matriculation exam are not very detailed. The principles for assessing student's essays are described in a table with three central dimensions (see Table 2):

- proper and relevant knowledge and correct use of concepts,
- analytic, logical and well-grounded argumentation,
- critical and multi-perspectival approach, ability to apply and evaluate knowledge.

The weight of these three dimensions is not explicitly specified, which can cause problems for the transparency of the assessment. However, specifying the weight of each dimension would be impractical because it should be decided for each exam question separately according to the content of the question. In Table 2, I describe the qualities of essays for four levels: failed, satisfactory, good and excellent.

The specific assessment criteria for each exam question are provided separately. For example, Question 1 in the spring 2023 history exam asks students to “describe the historical processes that can explain why many English villages were deserted in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries”. Two sources, a passage from a medieval chronicle and a photograph of the site of an ancient abandoned village are provided. The assessment criteria are as follows (translation by the author):

In a good answer, the student can connect the abandoning of the village of Little Oxendon to the effect of Black Death that ravaged Europe 1346–1353, to later plague epidemics, or both. The student can estimate the casualties of the Black Death (one-third of the population in Europe, in some regions more), and give a well-grounded explanation for why the death rate resulted in abandoning an entire village (for example, shortage of labor; hunger; lack of firewood; period of cold weather).

In an excellent answer, the student can use the reference to expensive labor in the source, and for example infer that the villagers moved elsewhere for a better living. The student can also note that the shortage of labor led from arable farming to raising sheep, which dissolved village communities. The student makes observations on the value of the source: for example, the chronicle is a first-hand source, and its account reflects the views of the upper social classes.

The criteria mostly discuss the subject matter of medieval social history. Examples are given of arguments that can be included in the essay, but whether they must be explicitly connected to the sources is not stated. Evaluating the value of the source is mentioned as a criterion for an excellent, but not a good answer, which seems to suggest explicitly that an ability to evaluate a source is not a basic element in historical thinking, but more like a skill worthy of special recognition. Interpretation of sources is not explicitly mentioned elsewhere in the criteria. Rantala et al. (2020) have highlighted this problem in the assessment criteria for the history matriculation exams generally: source criticism is mentioned only in the introduction of the assessment criteria. Based on their observations, Rantala et al. (2020) have suggested that source criticism should also be mentioned explicitly in the question-specific criteria to emphasize its importance and make teachers take proper notice of it.

As in the quote above, the question-specific assessment criteria often include expressions like “for example” or “student can also” to underline the diversity of arguments and examples that can be included in the essay. The exam question usually allows multiple approaches in the essay, and no model answer is provided, but the assessment criteria only outline the content to be included in the essays. Notes are made in the meeting of history examiners to remind examiners of the diversity of approaches they should expect in the students’ essays. The Matriculation Examination Board has taken steps to standardize assessment procedures so that inter-rater reliability between examiners is as good as possible. The level of detail in the assessment criteria is not unified, however, on the grounds that the school subjects have different traditions in the amount of space for interpretation examiners need for a valid assessment of students’ knowledge.

4. Discussion and conclusion

As discussed in this chapter, the exam questions in the history matriculation exam in spring 2023 focus on aims related to *understanding historical phenomena* and *acquiring and applying historical knowledge*. However, the current exam format does not assess the skills students use to locate relevant sources of historical evidence because the students are not allowed to search for sources during the exam. The sources are given to students in a curated form, often in brief excerpts, which can make the task seem artificial as an exercise in historical argumentation, as pointed out by Fordham (2017). In the exam format it is impossible to assess all of the aims of history teaching in the current core curriculum, but in

the classroom teachers can make use of a wider set of assessment instruments, like portfolio and project work, which indeed they often do (Rautiainen et al. 2020). The current technical solutions and guidelines in the matriculation exam (fixed duration of six hours, no access to Internet) make it difficult to assess students' skills in searching historical evidence and using it to make well-grounded arguments about a historical problem.

Currently students in the history matriculation exam are asked to write essays only. There are other products that students could be asked to create in the exam, and new question formats should be considered in the light of what is feasible. History teachers have not pressured exam constructors to use new question formats, like the multiple-choice questions that are used in some other school subjects' matriculation exams. Such requests come up occasionally because of concerns about students running out of time during the history exam because there are too many essays to write. It is valid to argue that the requirement to produce essays in the history exams may shift the focus from students' historical thinking skills to their general literacy skills (Seixas and Ercikan 2015). This, however, has not been viewed as a convincing argument for changing the format of the history exam because the exam is traditionally also seen as a maturity test where students must show a capacity to communicate in writing. There are also reservations among exam constructors regarding the validity of multiple-choice questions because, as Smith et al. show (2019), they can be problematic in evaluating complex knowledge in a subject like history that is interpretative in nature. Multiple-choice questions are used for evaluating historical literacy too (Eliasson et al. 2015), and in some cases they are favored because they may increase inter-rater reliability in assessment. However, as pointed out by Rosenlund (2023), they may communicate to students a view of history that downplays its interpretative nature.

The Finnish matriculation exam is a high-stakes exam. High-stakes exams can serve as a tool for pushing new curriculum aims and contents on to schools, but it can also hamper new pedagogical approaches. It may influence teachers to focus too much on teaching only what will be assessed in the matriculation exam. This is already the risk in Finland, and to some extent the reality (Rautiainen et al. 2019).

Ideally the questions in the matriculation exam and the aims set out in the core curriculum are in harmony, but there can be discrepancies due to exam constructors' differing interpretations of the curriculum. As has been discussed, the Finnish core curriculum is not very detailed in describing the aims and content for teaching history. It has been a deliberate policy in curriculum development

to provide sufficient space for teachers to interpret the document. The same degree of freedom has been provided to the exam constructors who create the matriculation exam. Among the exam constructors, there are experts in history education and historical research who may not always see the function of the exam the same way. The exam is both a final exam in secondary education and an entry exam in tertiary education, and this dual nature is sometimes reflected in the type of exam questions that are constructed.

The assessment criteria provide only general guidance about the elements in students' essays to which attention must be paid during evaluation. This system requires well-trained teachers who can apply the guidelines, but it also relies on a tradition of practical assessment knowledge that is transmitted from one generation of teachers to the next in schools and in teacher education programs. Teachers and examiners appear satisfied with the current level of detail in the assessment criteria in history exams, and the students rarely challenge the assessment results, but it will be interesting to see if demands for more detailed and explicit assessment criteria will appear in the future, triggered by the increased importance of matriculation exam grades in selecting students for tertiary education.

References

- Ahonen, S. (2003): Yhteinen koulu – tasa-arvoa vai tasapäisyyttä? Koulutuksellinen tasa-arvo Suomessa Snellmanista tähän päivään. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Ahonen, S. (2020): Form or Substance? Weighing Critical skills Against Identity Narratives in History Education. In: Berg, C./Christou, T. (Eds.): *The Palgrave Handbook of History and Social Studies Education*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 145–163.
- Ahvenisto, I. et al. (2013): Kuka oikeastaan asettaa opetuksen tavoitteet? Yhteiskuntaopin taidolliset tavoitteet ja niiden arviointi opetussuunnitelmien perusteissa ja ylioppilastutkinnossa. *Kasvatus ja Aika*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 40–55.
- Au, W. (2007): High-Stakes Testing and Curricular Control. A Qualitative Metasynthesis. In: *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 36, No. 5, pp. 258–267. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07306523>
- Chung, J. (2023): Research-informed Teacher Education, Teacher Autonomy and Teacher Agency. The Example of Finland. *London Review of Education*, Vol. 21, No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.21.1.13>
- Criteria for Final Assessment in Basic Education 2020. Helsinki: National Agency of Education.
- Eliasson, P. et al. (2015): Historical Consciousness and Historical Thinking Reflected in Large-Scale Assessment in Sweden. In: Ercikan, K./Seixas, P. (Eds.): *New Directions in Assessing Historical Thinking*. New York: Routledge, pp. 171–182.

- Espoo City Information (2024): Espoossa ja Kauniaisissa toisen asteen opinnot pääsee aloittamaan syksyllä yhteensä lähes 4 100 oppivelvollista nuorta. [https://www.espo.fi/uutiset/2024/06/espoossa-ja-kauniaisissa-toisen-asteen-opinnot-paasee-aloittamaan-syksylla-yhteensa-lahes-4-100](https://www.espo.fi/ uutiset/2024/06/ espoossa-ja-kauniaisissa-toisen-asteen-opinnot-paasee-aloittamaan-syksylla-yhteensa-lahes-4-100) (Accessed: 1.12.2024).
- European Commission (2022): European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system> (Accessed: 22.1.2025).
- Fordham, M. (2017): Assessment. In: Davies, I. (Ed.): *Debates in History Teaching*. London: Routledge, pp. 284–294.
- Gunnemyr, P. (2010): I huvudet på en finländsk provkonstruktör. In: Eliasson, P. et al. (Eds.): *Historia på väg mot framtiden*. Lund: Lund University and Malmö University, pp. 225–238.
- Krathwohl, D. (2002): A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy. An Overview. In: *Theory Into Practice*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 212–218. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4104_2
- Kupiainen, S. et al. (2023a): Finnish Matriculation Examination's Exam in Social Studies. An Appropriate Gatekeeper and Competence Support? In: *Journal of Social Science Education*, Vol. 22, No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.11576/jsse-5942>
- Kupiainen, S. et al. (2023b): Korkea-asteen opiskelijavalinnan uudistus lukion ja lukiolaisen silmin. Helsinki: Valtionneuvoston kanslia.
- Laki ylioppilastutkinnosta (2019): <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/2019/20190502> (Accessed: 22.1.2025).
- Lavonen, J. (2020): Curriculum and Teacher Education Reforms in Finland that Support the Development of Competences for the Twenty-first Century. In: Reimers, F. (Ed.): *Audacious Education Purposes. How Governments Transform the Goals of Education Systems*. Cham: SpringerOpen, pp. 65–80.
- Löfström, J. (2016): Suosivatko pojat ja tytöt eri koetehtäviä historian ylioppilaskokeissa? Tilastollinen analyysi. In: *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja*, Vol. 114, No. 3, pp. 278–292.
- Löfström, J. (2019): Yhteiskuntaoppi. Social Studies in Finland. A Country Report. In: *Journal of Social Science Education*, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 88–101. <https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-1583>
- Löfström, J. et al. (2010): Who Actually Sets the Criteria for Social Studies Literacy? The National Core Curricula and the Matriculation Examination as Guidelines for Social Studies Teaching in Finland in the 2000's. In: *Journal of Social Science Education*, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 6–14. <https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-536>
- Löfström, J./Kaarninen, M. (2013): Historian ja yhteiskuntaopin kokeet ylioppilastutkinnossa 2006–2012. Havaintoja ja tutkimustehtäviä. In: Juuti, K./Tainio, L. (Eds.): *Ainedidaktinen tutkimus koulutuspoliittisen päätöksenteon perustana*. Helsinki: Suomen ainedidaktinen tutkimusseura, pp. 177–195.
- Marti, A. et al. (2020). Läntinen identiteetti, tiedonalakohtaiset taidot vai historian käytön ymmärtäminen? Opetussuunnitelmat historianopetuksen orientaatioiden ristipaineissa. In: *Kasvatus ja Aika*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 75–97.

- Martin, J./Rose, D. (2008): *Genre Relations. Mapping Culture*. London: Equinox.
- Matriculation Examination Board (2024): Assessment of the Matriculation Examination. <https://www.ylioppilastutkinto.fi/en/assessment-and-certificates/assessment-matriculation-examination> (Accessed: 22.1.2025).
- National Agency of Education (2023): Lähes jokaisella peruskoulun keväällä päättäneellä on opiskelupaikka vuoden loppuun mennessä. <https://www.oph.fi/fi/uutiset/2023/lahes-jokaisella-peruskoulun-kevaalla-paattaneella-opiskelupaikka-vuoden-loppuun> (Accessed: 1.12.2024).
- National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014. Helsinki: National Agency of Education.
- National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 2019. Helsinki: National Agency of Education.
- Niemi, H. et al. (2018): The Role of Teachers in the Finnish Educational System. High Personal Autonomy and Responsibility. In: Niemi, H. et al. (Eds.): *The Teacher's Role in the Changing Globalizing World. Resources and Challenges Related to the Professional Work of Teaching*. Leiden: Brill Sense, pp. 47–61.
- Nieminen, J. et al. (2024): Diversity of Assessment Practices and Student Perceptions of Assessment in Finland. *The Curriculum Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 216–235. <https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.288>
- Norppa, J. (2019): Historian oppikirjojen ja opetussuunnitelmien tavoitteet ristiriidassa? In: *Koulu ja menneisyys*, Vol. 57, pp. 33–53.
- Paldanius, H. (2020): Kuinka pohtivuutta edellyttävään tehtävänantoon vastataan? Erilaiset kirjoittajääännet lukiolaisten historian esseissä. In: *Kasvatus ja Aika*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 35–56.
- Puustinen, M. et al. (2020): Sisältötiedon toistamista vai aineiston analyysia? Tiedonalakohtaiset tekstitaidot historian ylioppilaskokeen tehtävänannoissa ja pisteytysohjeissa. In: *Kasvatus ja Aika*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 9–34.
- Rantala, J. et al. (2020): Näinkö historiaa opitaan? Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Rantala, J./Ouakrim-Soivio, N. (2020): Why Does Changing the Orientation of History Teaching Take So Long? A Case Study from Finland. In: Berg, C./Christou, T. (Eds.): *The Palgrave Handbook of History and Social Studies Education*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 471–494.
- Rautiainen, M. et al. (2019): History Teaching in Finnish General Upper Secondary Schools. Objectives and Practices. In: *History Education Research Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 291–305. <https://doi.org/10.18546/HERJ.16.2.09>
- Rautiainen, M. et al. (2020): Jotain sinne päin. Lukion historian opetuksen arviointikulttuuri. In: *Kasvatus ja Aika*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 57–74.
- Rosenlund, D. (2023): The Nature of Historical Knowledge in Large-Scale Assessments – a Study of the Relationship Between Item Formats and Offerings of Epistemic Cognition in the Swedish National Test in History. In: *Frontiers in Education*, Vol. 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1253926>
- Salmenkivi, E. (2013): Ylioppilastutkinnon rakenne- ja reaali-koeuudistuksen vaikutuksia. Miten lisääntynyt valinnaisuus ohjaa lukiolaisia. In: *Kasvatus ja Aika*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 24–39.

- Salokangas, M. et al. (2019): Teachers' Autonomy Deconstructed. Irish and Finnish Teachers' Perceptions of Decision-Making and Control. In: *European Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 1–22.
- Seixas, P./Ercikan, K. (2015): Introduction. The New Shape of History Assessments. In: Ercikan, K./Seixas, P. (Eds.): *New Directions in Assessing Historical Thinking*. New York: Routledge, pp. 1–13.
- Smith, M. et al. (2019): History Assessments of Thinking. A Validity Study. In: *Cognition and Instruction*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 118–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2018.1499646>
- Säntti, J. et al. (2023): Unmentioned Challenges of Finnish Teacher Education. Decontextualisation, Scientification and the Rhetoric of the Research-Based Agenda. In: Thrupp, M. et al. (Eds.): *Finland's Famous Education System. Unvarnished Insights Into Finnish Schooling*. Singapore: Springer Nature, pp. 105–119.
- Tillonen, S. (2022): Ainereali ja historian ja yhteiskuntaopin ylioppilaskirjoittajat. In: *Koulu ja menneisyys*, Vol. 59, pp. 112–131.
- Veijola, A./Rautiainen, M. (2019). Ei mitään uutta auringon alla. Historian opetuksen muutos ja jatkuvuus. In: *Koulu ja menneisyys*, Vol. 57, pp. 1–31.
- Virta, A. (1995): *Abiturientin historian ja yhteiskuntaopin tieto*. Turku: University of Turku.
- Vuorio-Lehti, M. (2007): *Valkolakin viesti. Ylioppilastutkintokeskustelu Suomessa toisen maailmansodan jälkeen*. Turku: University of Turku.