

Transitions – Admission to Higher Education  
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In Hungary, major changes are taking place in the system of higher education. The directions of these changes are visible, legal preparations and changes have been completed, however, professional opinion is divided concerning predictable outcomes. Some see a chance for qualitative renewal in the changes, while others fear a return to the period preceding reforms of 2005-2006 – introducing advanced level secondary school-leaving examination and the training structure of the Bologna Declaration.

By 2005, the absolute expansion of higher education, starting in 1991, was replaced by relative expansion, as a result of which 38-40 percent of a single age group enter universities. This tendency was reinforced by introducing the so-called *advanced level secondary school-leaving examination*, which was accompanied by the abolition of university entrance examinations. The negative effects of the absolute and relative expansion on the training processes are identified by a part of professional opinion as consequences of the abolition of entrance examinations. In these circumstances, Hungary introduced a new training structure – the Bologna-compliant model in 2006 – which strengthened the feeling and impression of disorder and eroded the traditional university-image in society.

Today's changes partly aim at reconstructing that – real or perceived – university-image and partly assume that the achievement of objectives are derived from direct social interests. This process of change will be presented in the light of the secondary school-leaving or university entrance examinations and assessment procedures in this transitional phase.

## Transitions – Admission to Higher Education

Following the political change of regime in 1989 there were continuous, in some cases fundamental changes in the Hungarian public education. This statement equally applies to public education, vocational training and higher education as well. In the past decades all succeeding governments replacing each other each four consecutive year, have initiated a range of changes. However, they did not create a uniform course of development, in most cases, the routine operations of the school system were determined by inconsistent or opposing educational policies. To describe the past two decades, we are going to mention a few measures of our educational policy:

- in 1998 we raised the age limit of compulsory school attendance from 16 to 18 years of age;
- in 2011 we restored the age limit of compulsory school attendance from 18 to 16 years of age again;
- we introduced the sixth national curriculum in public education in the September of 2013, following two years of preparation;
- in 1996 we abolished the three-year training of skilled workers based on the eight-year course of primary schools, instead, we introduced the so-called advanced level vocational training based on a ten-year course of school;
- in 2012, instead of the advanced level vocational training based on a ten-year course, we reinitiated the training of skilled workers based on the eight years with the name advanced vocational training;
- from 2006 we introduced the two-step training in higher education in compliance with the Bologna Declaration with the exception of a few courses, like medicine, law and arts;
- in September 2013 we reestablished the so-called undivided training from 2006 in teacher training, a significant scope of higher education.

The selected examples only indicate the 'change industry' settled equally on issues of structure and content, which has emerged in the Hungarian public education. Further on, we are only going to deal with a single issue: the conditions of the secondary school leaving exam and of entering higher education.

Obtaining the school leaving certificate or finishing secondary education – the so-called higher intermediate – successfully has become generally accepted in our society today, 60% of the age group 25-64 already possesses this qualification.<sup>1</sup> This general acceptance is demonstrated by the fact that nearly 70% of 10th grade secondary school students intend to obtain a qualification exceeding the secondary school leaving certificate.<sup>2</sup> By this we also mean that obtaining the school leaving certificate has virtually developed a mass education in Hungary.

Prior to the political change of regime, the Hungarian higher education system used to operate as a so-called elite-training institution. This meant that maximum 12-15% of each age-group gained admission to universities and colleges at their own, self-organized entrance exam (a condition of sitting for the exam was a successful school leaving exam). By the above-mentioned period – the second half of the 1980s – the absolute expansion of secondary

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Education at a Glance, 2010: p 34

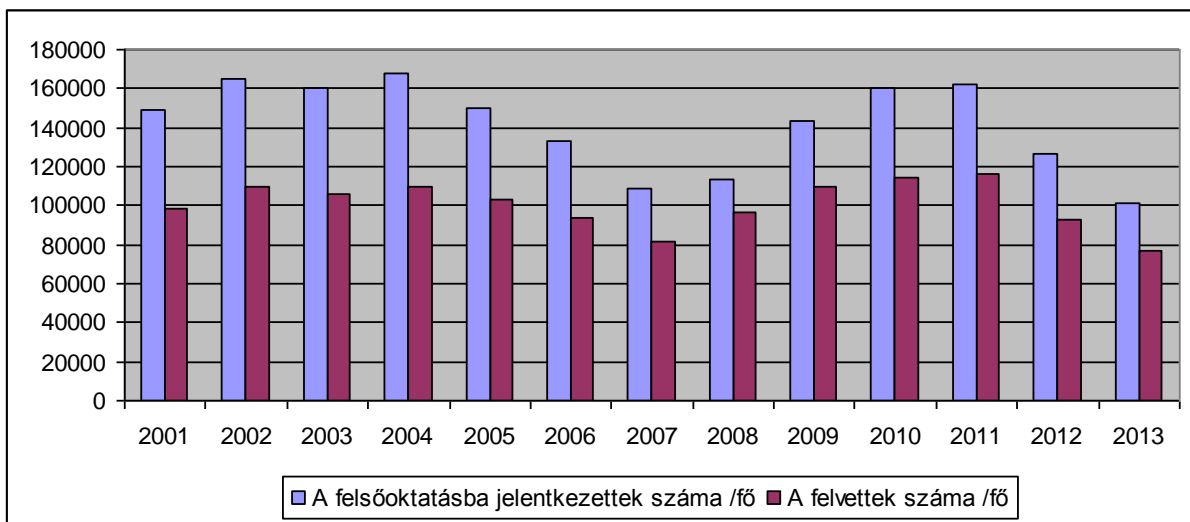
<sup>2</sup> Source: Országos kompetenciamérés, 2009. Országos jelentés: Table 16

education had already finished, i.e. tens of thousands of secondary school-leavers were preparing for entrance exams – the majority without success.

Following the change of regime – virtually from 1991 – the doors of higher education opened. Considering the earlier commitments and the training capacity of the network of institutions, the absolute expansion took place at an extremely great pace, which more than quadrupled the number of students in ten years. Not only the gradually appearing social demand or the individual attitudes of the retrieving of the previously uncompleted studies in higher education played a role in this unforeseen expansion, it was generated by the institutions of higher education as well.

Until 1996 the operation of higher education was centrally financed, thus the number of students to be accepted at each course, level of instruction and specialization was determined by the state every year. Within these bounds, however, the question: who can start their university studies, was decided by the ranking - which was generally kept high standard – set up at the entrance exams. From 1997 in addition to the state-financed number of students, the institutions of higher educations were allowed to initiate fee-paying courses. This measure made the institutions concerned about increasing the number of students as well, so fee-paying courses also played a role in the emergence of the above-mentioned absolute expansion.

Starting in 2001 – although with alternating tendencies – the period of relative expansion arrived in the Hungarian higher education. The state even declared that they intended to decrease the state-financed number of students gradually. The institutions of higher education tried to compensate this situation and keep their numbers of students on the same level at least for a while (see: Figure 1).



*Figure 1 Number of students applied to and admitted at higher education in 2001-2013 (persons)*

Following the change of regime the network of institutions of higher education accepted the multiplied number of students with a virtually unchanged infrastructure: with central quality control at state-financed places and with a self-organized entrance exam and an own decision-making at the fee-paying places. With the growing number of students it became more and more transparent that the institutions were not prepared for the instruction becoming mass in character, while, at the same time, they had also become concerned, the success of the

instruction was gradually decreasing. The opinion that the students' failure can be primarily blamed on the declining quality of school-leavers slowly evolved among university professors, then became declared in higher education. This point of view has not been approved by the international attainment surveys that have been going on for a decade and a half or the regular Hungarian competence surveys either. They consider the performance level of public education relatively steady rather.<sup>3</sup> The above-mentioned opinion is probably based on the 'illusion' which tries to compare the average achievement level of the upper 15% of the age-group entering higher education before the change of regime to the average achievement level of the 45% entering after the emergence of mass education. In this case, the difference is indeed striking (see: Figures 2 & 3).

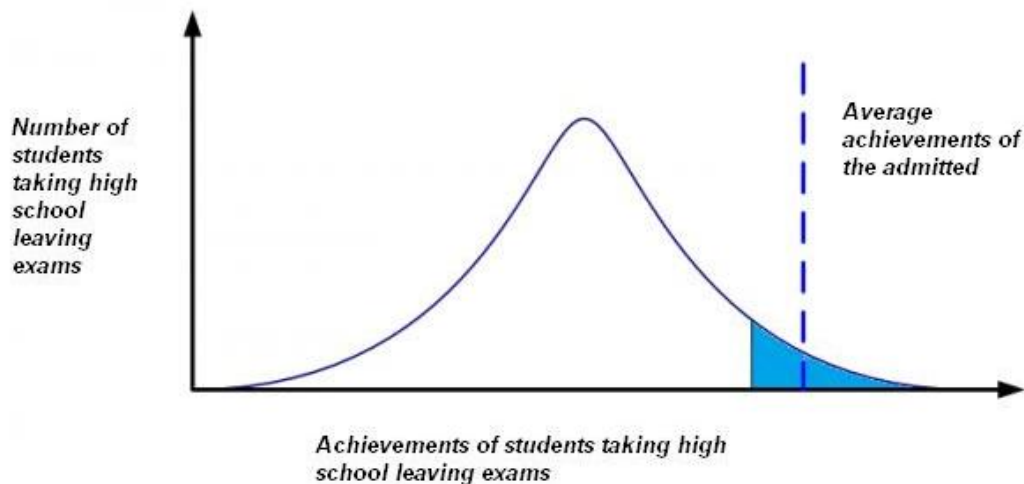


Figure 2 Average performance of the admitted in higher education in case of the entrance of 15% of the age-group<sup>4</sup>

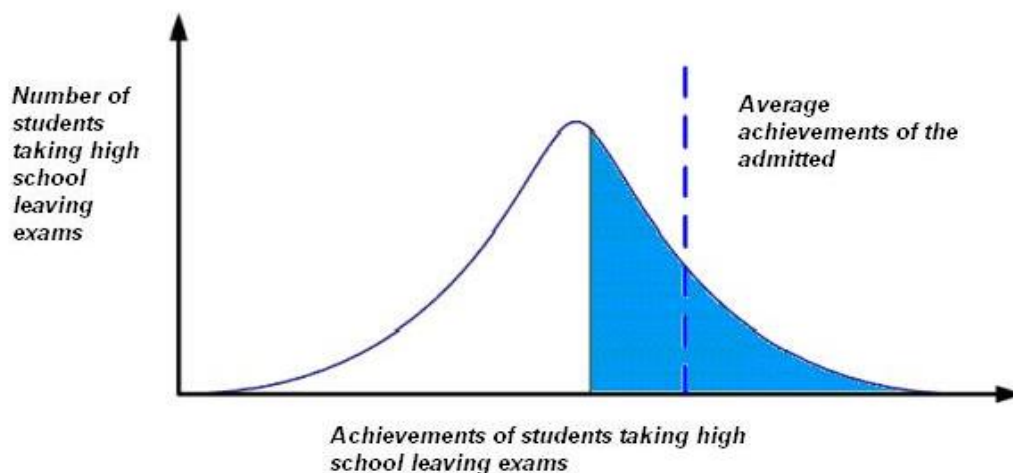


Figure 3 Average performance of the admitted in higher education assuming the entrance of 45% of the age-group<sup>5</sup>

In the beginning, the public education system did not reflect upon the charges defined in higher education. In the years at or about the change of regime the routine of the secondary

<sup>3</sup> Source: Országos kompetenciamérés 2012. Országos jelentés. Oktatási Hivatal, Budapest.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Radó Péter: Oktatáspolitikai mítoszok: a felsőoktatás a közoktatás minőségromlásáról.

<sup>5</sup> Source: Radó Péter: Oktatáspolitikai mítoszok: a felsőoktatás a közoktatás minőségromlásáról

school-leaving exam seemed to be a relative certainty of the public education system. The professional discourse about the topic was primarily on theoretical grounds, discussing mainly the chances of adopting the international experience, or the issues raised by procedure control and output control.

The new national curriculum due to be introduced in 1998, however, brought many new ideas from the aspect of the school-leaving exam as well. The educational policy at the time was planning on transforming the school structure in addition to the changes of the regulations of content. It raised the formerly 8 grades of primary school to ten grades and was planning a so-called primary examination at the end of the 10th grade. This exam – with a content involving mainly competences of Hungarian, history, mathematics and foreign languages – made way towards vocational training. The 11th and 12th grades and the school-leaving exams closing them, however, were preparatory for higher education specifically. The new system made rearranging the school-leaving exam appropriate as well.

The regulations for the conduct of the school-leaving exam issued in 1997 introduced integrated, standardized requirements of content and policy applicable to all types of secondary school. The regulations ordained that the educational obligations of the last two grades of secondary school were determined by the elaborated exam requirements (the control of content in the national curriculum involved the 10-grade elementary school).<sup>6</sup> This also meant that the exam concept was based on output regulation and intended to make way specifically for higher education.

Due to the changes in educational policy in 1998, the establishment of the 10-grade elementary school did not happen, consequently, neither did the system of primary examinations (nevertheless, the vocational training based on the 10 grades was introduced). The regulations for the conduct of the school-leaving exam issued in 1997, however, still applied with a few modifications that did not affect the essentials, and continued to function as the document of integrated, standardized exams built on output regulation.

In 1999 Hungary was among the countries signing the Bologna Declaration, thus the transformation of our structure of instruction which had a dual higher education system earlier on. The preparations, however, were several years delayed, then eventually in 2003 they were launched at a great pace, hoping to start the introduction in 2005. This period coincided with the acceptance, as well as the introduction in 2005, of the new national curriculum of our public education. Thus, the systems of public education and higher education were preparing for the fundamental changes simultaneously, by accepting new laws<sup>7</sup> in both cases. The simultaneous preparations, however, were not accompanied by cooperation, both improvements went on following their own internal logic.

The attitudes of the experts working on the elaboration of the new school-leaving exam were mostly based on the experience with the functioning of the regulations for the conduct of the exam from 1997, although they also considered the criticism of content in higher education. In addition to the above-mentioned, they acknowledged the fact that the entrance exams to higher education gradually lost their value, since, in the case of fee-paying courses they practically became a mere formality.

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Horváth Zsuzsanna - Lukács Judit (2006): A kétszintű érettségi vizsga. Új érettségi Magyarországon. Országos Közoktatási Intézet, Budapest.

<sup>7</sup> See: 2003. évi LXI. Törvény a közoktatásról szóló 1993. évi LXXIX. törvény módosításáról és 2005. évi CXXXIX. Törvény a felsőoktatásról.

After years of development and considering the experience of the mock exam in 2004, the characteristic features of the school-leaving exam introduced in 2005 were the following:

- the school-leaving exam is an organic exam system, independent of the type and specialization of the secondary school (4, 6 or 8-grade secondary grammar school, vocational school, bilingual secondary school, nationality education, the secondary schools of adult education), as well as the content of the training;
- the integrated exam requirements, lists of tasks and assessment procedures are standardized, their arrangement is a central duty of the educational administration;
- the type of the exam is both written and oral in all subjects;
- the school-leaving exam has two levels, it can be taken on intermediate or advanced level according to the student's choice;
- the exam on intermediate level can be qualified as an externally controlled internal exam, the exam on advanced level can only be organized as an external exam;
- both the exam on intermediate and on advanced level are of identical legal value, both provide the opportunity to enter higher education without an entrance exam (the institutions of higher education may require taking the exam on advanced level in specified subjects);
- the assessment of exam performance is carried out according to uniform perspectives, the minimum level of performance is 20%, from 2013 25%;
- the subjects of the school-leaving exam are Hungarian literature and grammar, history, mathematics, a foreign language and an optional subject (from 2013 a science subject);
- the exams on advanced level can be taken both in the so-called normal course of the school-leaving exam and later on as an upgrading exam.

The introduction of the two-level school-leaving exam was accounted for, on one hand, by the elimination of the compulsion of taking several examinations (school-leaving and entrance exams), on the other hand, by providing comparability for students' performance (entrance exam ranking). In this concept, the exam on intermediate level justified the successful completion of studies in secondary education, and the exam on advanced level was a condition of entering higher education.

The exams on advanced level mentioned here, expected students to be familiar with the curriculum and the relating information including theory, to recognize correlation systems and deeper contexts, to be able to operate convergent and divergent reasoning on a higher level, to possess the competences of self-reliant acquisition and processing of information. These higher level exam requirements accounted for the arrangement of external exams (see: Table I). The higher expectations were realized with the consent of the institutions of higher education in order to prepare students for studies in higher education. According to the intention of the legislator, the institutions of higher education were allowed to decide to set exams on advanced level as a requirement at discretion.

As an output regulation of the public education system, the new school-leaving exam appeared in 2005, and substituted for the entrance exams of institutions of higher education, which was stated in statutes as well. Subsequently, the admission rankings were set up exclusively according to secondary school performance, except for a few courses, e.g. arts, nursery, P.E.-sports.

Table 1 Features of the levels of the school-leaving exam introduced in 2005<sup>8</sup>

Exam types	Intermediate level	Advanced level
Assessment of the written exam performance	Central lists of tasks, on site assessment according to the central guide for error correction and assessment	Central lists of tasks, central assessment (organized regionally, conducted by external boards) according to the guide for error correction and assessment
Assessment of the oral exam performance	On site list of these compiled according to the requirements, as member of the on site board of examiners, the examining instructor assesses	Central list of these compiled according to the requirements, independent, external, subject-oriented board of three assesses
Converting into grades	According to the scale laid down in the regulations for the conduct of the exam <sup>9</sup>	According to the scale laid down in the regulations for the conduct of the exam <sup>10</sup>

The new situation was acknowledged by the higher education system, in the first few years, however, they did not require taking advanced level exams, except for the foreign language courses. The institutions were afraid that the expectations of the advanced level school-leaving exam would significantly decrease the number of students applying for fee-paying courses. This fact, however, affected school-leavers as well, out of whom fewer and fewer wished to undertake the remarkable increase of the study load that accompanies the preparation. This tendency was supported by the method of calculation helping to set up the admission rankings, which considered advanced level exams of a moderate value in the beginning. In the first two years the ratio of advanced level exams compared to the number of all exams was around 10%, then gradually decreased until 2009 (see: Figure 4).

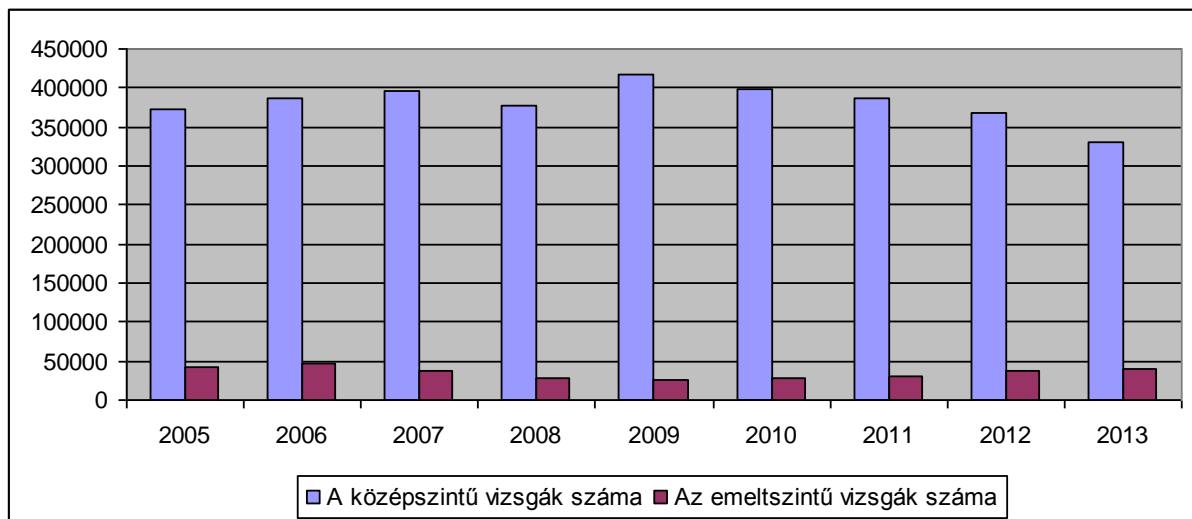


Figure 4 Number of intermediate and advanced level exams from 2005 to 2013

<sup>8</sup> Source: Horváth Zsuzsanna - Lukács Judit (2006): A kétszintű érettségi vizsga. Új érettségi Magyarországon. Országos Köznevelési Intézet, Budapest.

<sup>9</sup> Grades: 80% = 5; 60% = 4; 40% = 3; 25% = 2.

<sup>10</sup> Grades: 60% = 5; 47% = 4; 33% = 3; 25% = 2.

The institutions of higher education which were averse to the expectations of advanced level exams in the beginning, specified these exams as a requirement for the entrance from 2010 in the case of a few courses, e.g. doctor, veterinary surgeon. From 2012 further courses not lacking applicants joined the former ones. Recognizing this tendency, the institutions of higher education resigned their authority to set requirements and granted the opportunity to the educational administration. As a result of the central decision, from 2013 the number of courses setting expectations rocketed, while the courses launched earlier increased the severity of their conditions (see: Table 2).

*Table 2 Courses requiring the advanced level school-leaving exam from 2010 to 2013<sup>11</sup>*

Courses and compulsory or optional subjects	2010	2011	2012	2013
	Number of advanced level exams required			
Veterinary surgeon: biology, chemistry	one	one	one	two
Forestry engineer: mathematics or biology, physics			one	one
Dentist, doctor, pharmacist: biology physics chemistry	one	one	one	two
Lawyer: history, Hungarian, foreign language				one
Applied economics: mathematics				one
Economy analysis: mathematics				one
Architect: mathematics			one	one
Architect with university degree: mathematics				one
Energeticist: mathematics, physics			one	one
Faculty of arts and humanities – all courses: adequate subject				one
I.T. engineer-librarian: Hungarian, history				one
Cultural anthropology: Hungarian, history				one

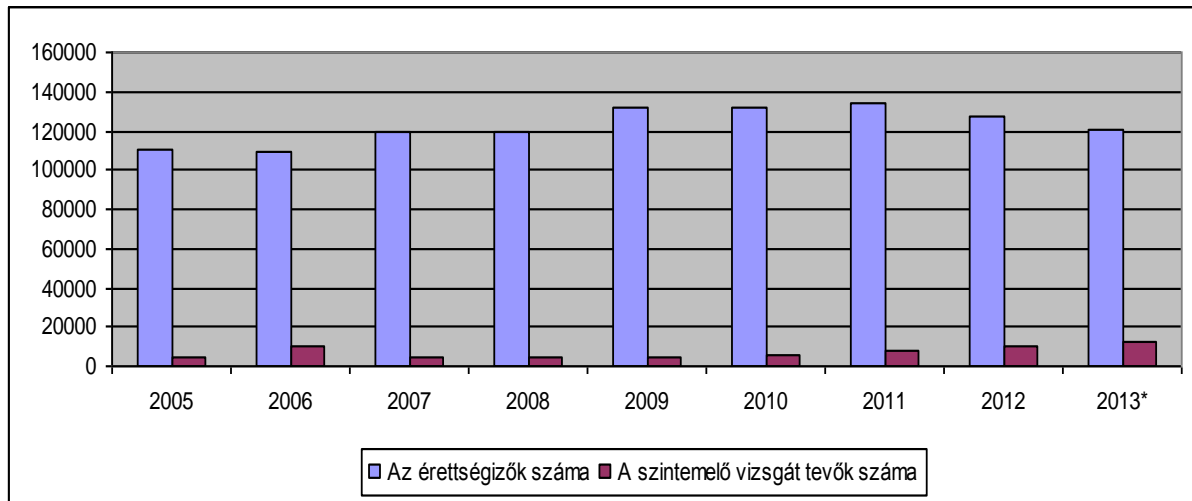
Due to the influence of the above-mentioned measures, from 2010 the rate of students taking advanced level exams started to increase, which exceeded 10% by 2013 again (see: Figure 4). A gradual increase can be projected for the following years, as the measures currently under planning are about to involve further courses, as well as to raise the requirements for the entrance. We should also mention that the frequent changes of direction in the educational policy make the transition from public education to higher education hard to plan. School-leavers are supposed to know at least two years prior to registering for exams, under what conditions they can start their university studies. In the past few years, there was not even a chance for that on several occasions, which makes it possible that the rate is fairly high and is continuously growing of students, who, already possessing a school-leaving certificate, are forced to take a so-called upgrading exam (see: Figure 5).

To sum up, we can say that in the past few years, there have been fundamental changes concerning the secondary school-leaving exam providing the transition from the public education system to the higher education system, as well as the system of the entrance exam. Without the cooperation of the two systems, these changes frequently undermined either each other's impact, or the effectiveness of the mutual advantages. Now it seems that the two-level school-leaving exam system is beginning to function adequately, even from the aspect of

<sup>11</sup> Source: [http://www.lkg-bp.sulinet.hu/portal/letolt/erettségi/felveteli\\_2013\\_targyak.pdf](http://www.lkg-bp.sulinet.hu/portal/letolt/erettségi/felveteli_2013_targyak.pdf)



higher education. It is also apparent, however, that the ideas concerning the near future which have not been consulted with each other, e.g. abolishing the advanced level of the school-leaving exam system, or restoring the entrance exams of higher education, mean a threat to this adequate functioning.



\* Estimated data

Figure 5 Number of students taking the school-leaving exam and the upgrading exam from 2005 to 2013 (persons)

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