

A STUDY ON POSTGRADUATE DIDACTIC CERTIFICATION LEVEL II IN ROMANIAN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The first part of the paper analyses the existing legal framework for postgraduate didactic certification level II as established by The National Education Act (2011) and by The Methodology of Continuous Training for Pre-university Teaching Staff (2011). The second part of the paper analyses The Syllabus for Didactic Certification Level II Exam in Geography (2008), and presents some suggestions for future improvement: principles of establishing thematic content and rationale, annual reviewing and updating of suggested bibliography in accordance with content and other specifications.

Keywords: *professional continuous training, personal development, educational policies, tertiary education*

INTRODUCTION

Gaining a Postgraduate Didactic Certification Level II is an important goal for Romanian teachers of Geography, for their professional development and career advancement. To obtain this certification is regarded as a difficult step to take, which is a reason why not all of the teachers meeting the legal pre-requisites for the enrolment for this exam apply.

The objectives of the present research are the following: 1) to analyse the legal framework for postgraduate didactic certification level II; 2) to analyse the methodology for the postgraduate didactic certification level II for teachers of Geography in pre-university education; 3) to analyse *The Syllabus for Didactic Certification Level II Exam in Geography*. An analysis of the questions included in the written test of teaching methodology of the subject matter (geography, in this case) and of the marking scheme and specifications will be the topic of a future research paper.

ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR POSTGRADUATE DIDACTIC CERTIFICATION LEVEL II

Article 242 (1) of *The National Education Act* specifies that teaching staff continuous training consists of personal professional development and career development. According to this law, career development involves the awarding of postgraduate didactic certification level II and level I, following successful assessment of various competences through appropriate examinations (http://www.dreptonline.ro/legislatie/legea_educatiei_nationale_lege_1_2011.php). The text of the law mentions that "the postgraduate didactic certification level II can be awarded to teachers who have completed a 4-year-full-time length of service as certified teachers and successfully pass the following tests:

a) a special visit for classroom observation of teaching and learning made by a school inspector, preceded by at least two regular classroom observation visits adequately timed over the 4-year period;

b) a written examination in subject teaching methodology, involving interdisciplinary and creative approaches, designed on the basis of a list of topics and bibliography approved by MECTS¹, for each specialist subject;

c) an oral examination in pedagogy, based on the syllabus approved by MECTS, which also includes knowledge of psychology and of educational sociology" (2011, p. 42).

The law specifies that, in the event of the candidate's unsuccessful performance, the examination for postgraduate didactic certification level II can be retaken after at least two academic school years. The tests, list of topics, bibliography, organisational procedures of the postgraduate didactic

¹Ministerul Educației, Cercetării, Tineretului și Sportului [The Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport, currently the Ministry of National Education]

certification level II examinations are regulated by a methodological guide issued by MECTS.

In comparison with the provisions included in the former *Education Act* (1995), the most significant change brought by the new law for the *Didactics of Geography* is that a test in subject teaching methodology, not in the subject matter itself, is mandatory. Through this new approach, a greater emphasis is placed on the subject matter didactics, which subsequently involves a greater responsibility of universities in the continuous development of teachers in this scientific field and in assessing candidates' performance in the written test.

ANALYSIS OF SOME SPECIFICATIONS INCLUDED IN THE METHODOLOGY OF POSTGRADUATE DIDACTIC CERTIFICATION LEVEL II

Based on *The National Education Act* (no. 1/2011) provisions, *The Methodology of Continuous Training for Pre-university Teaching Staff* (2011)² was elaborated (www.arteiasi.ro/universitate/other/dppd/Ordin_5561_2011.doc). Under Section 7 of this document it is stated that "the award of the postgraduate didactic certification level II acknowledged a teacher's growth in expertise, confirmed by the results obtained in specifically designed tests" in order to emphasize "the value added professionalism in the period elapsed since earning his or her teaching certification" (2011, p. 2). From this provision, we deduce the importance of test questions and marking standards designing for the assessment of candidates in the subject matter teaching methodology. We reckon it is difficult to assess the value added professionalism to the degree of performance of a certified teacher since this was measured using a marking scale, the marks being awarded for the performance in structuring and presenting certain topics in a test, without weighting the score against a professional standard.

Under the provisions of Section 10 (1) it is specified that, in order to enrol for the postgraduate didactic certification level II and register for this examination, candidates should have got "very good" and "good" rating levels of performance in the annual appraisals and on the occasion of classroom observations made by a school inspectorate representative over a period of two years prior to enrolment. Candidates should demonstrate their expertise through: quality teaching performances, irreproachable professional conduct, high-level of didactic competence, proved by the outcomes of the teaching-learning process (Section 10.2, p. 2). A current inspection to observe the candidate teacher's classes is performed by a

²Approved through OMECTS no. 5561/31 Oct. 2011, published as an annex to O.M. in *Monitorul Oficial*, Part I, no. 767bis/31 Oct. 2011

specialist inspector or an assistant-inspector prior to enrolment for the postgraduate didactic certification level II examination, and a second inspection for observation of classes is performed after the candidate's registration for the exam (Section 11, p. 3). These current inspections consist in observing and evaluating teaching performance during four lessons given by the candidate-teacher. During these lesson observation activities, the specialist inspector or assistant-inspector assesses the candidate's instructional performance using a standardized observation form, included in the methodology. Under Section 17 (1, 2, p. 16) provisions, it is underlined that the special school inspection for a candidate teacher's overall proficiency is assessed and rated by the specialist inspector or assistant-inspector who performs the observation of classroom activities by means of awarding a mark on a rating scale from 10 to 1 marks and that the minimum pass mark is 8 (eight).

With reference to the composition of the board of examiners for the postgraduate didactic certification level II exam, for the written and oral tests, the Section 18 of the Methodology (p. 16) stipulates that this board is made up of a university professor, associate professor, or PhD lecturer from the Department of Specialist Methodology/Pedagogy as Chairman, university professors, associate professors, or PhD lecturers in the specialist subject methodology as examining members for the particular subject in which the candidates take the exam in pedagogy.

Regarding the subjects or topic questions for the written test, under Section 19 (p. 16) of the Methodology, it is mentioned that these are agreed upon in the plenary meeting of the board of examiners, according to the exam syllabuses approved by MECTS. The members of the board of examiners submit at least three versions of the written test out of which the chairperson will randomly choose one to be set to all the candidates of the same specialist subject. The other two versions are considered substitute variants. The time limit allotted for test completion is of three hours, counted down from the moment the questions of the test are transcribed on the white/blackboard or copies of the test are distributed to all candidates. The marking scheme and descriptions are to be posted immediately after the test finishes (p. 16). Under Section 21 of the Methodology, it is specified that the assessment and marking of the written test is made and done independently by the two examiners appointed who grant marks on a scale of 10 to 1.

The provisions under Section 22 (p. 7) specify that the oral test in pedagogy is done based on the use of examination tickets containing subject matter questions and that these tickets are the same for all the candidates from an exam centre. The questions printed on the examination tickets are devised by the examiners and checked by the chairperson of the board (sub-boards), and are based on the thematic list in the syllabi approved by MECTS. Each ticket contains at least two questions. What we note is that, within the provisions of the Methodology, there is no mentioning of the examiners' obligation to include questions on knowledge of psychology or educational sociology on these oral exam tickets, as the Education Act (2011) specifies.

Under Section 24 of the Methodology, it is regulated that a pass in the postgraduate didactic certification level II exam is obtained by getting a minimum mark of 8 at the special school inspection of classroom teaching performance and by being awarded a mark of minimum 7 at each of the tests taken by a candidate sitting for this exam. The candidates who do not get a minimum pass mark at each of the tests for the exam will not be able to attend the remaining test/tests.

Under the Order by MEN no. 3129/01.02.2013 with reference to modifications and additions to be made to *The Methodology of Continuous Training for Pre-university Teaching Staff, approved by the Order of MECTS no. 5561/2011* (<http://dppd.ubbcluj.ro/images/gr2/OM3129-2013.pdf>), Section 23 mentions that in order to receive a pass in the postgraduate didactic certification level II exam, a candidate should get at least a mark of 8 at the special inspection of teaching performance and at least a mark of 8 in the written and oral tests for this exam. The pass mark average of the certification exam is of minimum 8 and is calculated as the arithmetic mean of the marks for the three tests of the exam. We notice that by increasing the pass threshold to 8 in specialist subject didactics a greater importance is given to this subject matter in teachers' continuous training, along with a greater responsibility of the universities in organizing teachers' preparation in this domain, in devising test questions and in assessing candidates' performance in the written test.

In the Note no. 2047077/28.05.2013 of MEN (<http://dppd.ubbcluj.ro/images/gr2/Note no.2047077-28.05.2013 of MEN regarding Didactic Certification Level II.pdf>), the provisions in Section 23 are reiterated, reminding what the three tests are: the special inspection, specialist subject methodology test and oral test. In 2013, these new legal and methodological procedures were applied for the first time.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SYLLABUS FOR POSTGRADUATE DIDACTIC CERTIFICATION LEVEL II EXAM IN GEOGRAPHY

The thematic syllabus for postgraduate certification level II in Geography was devised, analysed, readjusted and re-organized by a specialist workgroup on the 7th of February 2005, and its contents were discussed and validated by the National Board of Specialists in Geography on the 8th of February 2005 (<http://geografie.ubbcluj.ro/docs/invatamant/postuniv/4ProgramaGradIIGeografie2008.pdf>). The main purpose of the debate organized among specialists on that occasion was to update the contents of this syllabus and to adjust them to the standards and requirements of the school curriculum and education reform. Some themes formerly included were dropped; others were reformulated in order to correlate them with the training needs of pre-university school teachers. In the introduction of the document, authors mention that all the contents of the Didactics of Geography were changed and that the bibliography recommended to candidates was updated.

As an element of novelty, we underline that the didactic training prerequisites were correlated with the competences for the job of teacher with a didactic level II: to be knowledgeable of the contents of the specialist subject syllabus and of didactics of this subject, using the optional bibliography; to demonstrate the ability to transfer specialist knowledge to various teaching-learning contexts, maximizing the effectiveness of performance; to synthesize specialist information and relate it to curriculum contents taught or assessed (p. 1). However, we note that these are only general competences and their re-formulation is necessary in order to adjust them to the requirements of the new education Act and the methodologies related to it.

Analysing the themes included in the syllabus, the following aspects are noted:

1) 44 of the topics are from *Physical Geography* (43%), 16 topics (16%) are from *Human Geography*, 21 topics (20%) from *the Geography of Romania*, 8 topics (8%) from *the Geography of continents*, 13 topics (13%) from *The methodology of Geographical Research* (Fig. 1). It is obvious that the thematic syllabus focuses mainly on theoretical aspects (89 themes; 87.25%) and less on practical ones (13 themes; 12.75%). This orientation is typical of the school curricula, too.

2) many of the topics can be correlated to the high school curricula and only a few to those in middle school or gymnasium. This constitutes an advantage for the continuous training of high school teachers and a disadvantage for the one meant for middle-school or gymnasium teachers.

3) there are many topics unrelated to any of the current syllabuses for either high school or middle school levels of education. For example: *Geomorphological Zoning; Environmental Revitalization, Restructuring and Reconstruction*, etc.

4) many topics are of a great extent, of a high complexity of approach and require a high level of expertise in Geography. For example: *A complex characterization of first and second order landforms of the Romanian Carpathians; The evolution of economic structures in the Mediterranean Basin and the Danube Basin – the Black Sea Basin*, etc.

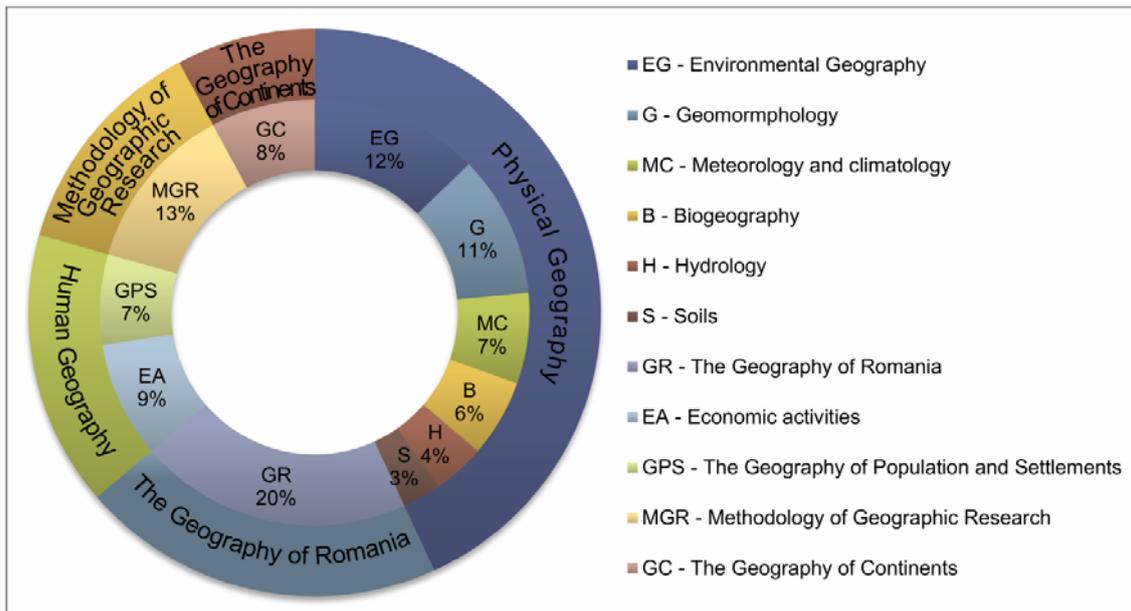


Fig. 1. The proportionality of topics of Geography in the Syllabus for the postgraduate didactic certification level II, by the sub-branches of the discipline

5) there are significant differences in the extensiveness of topics: some topics are suitable to write whole books about (for example: *Hills and plateaus – individual features typical of the natural and socio-economic components; landscape specificity of landform subdivisions. Plains: genetic and morphostructural specificity of soils, vegetation and hydrology; socio-economic specificity; regional diversification; the favourability of relief and land use*) or topics for doctoral theses (for instance, *Comprehensive harness of rivers in the Romanian Carpathians and their impact on quality of the environment*), and other topics less extensive (for example, *The issue of desertification, Romanian villages – typical features and types of rural settlements; The Steppe Area of Romania*).

An analysis of the recommended bibliography in the syllabus for Geography highlights the fact that the latest publications predominate in a total of 66 titles: 32 works published between 2001 and 2005; 15 works from 1996 to 2000. Only 14 works were published before 1996 (21.21%) (Fig. 2). However, the fact that this syllabus was updated in 2008, the recommended bibliography does not direct the 2013 potential candidates preparing for this exam to benefit from the latest works in the specialist subject published after this year. Between 2008 and 2013, a large variety of scientific books in the domain of Geography was published. They may represent valuable references in the continuous training of Geography teachers.

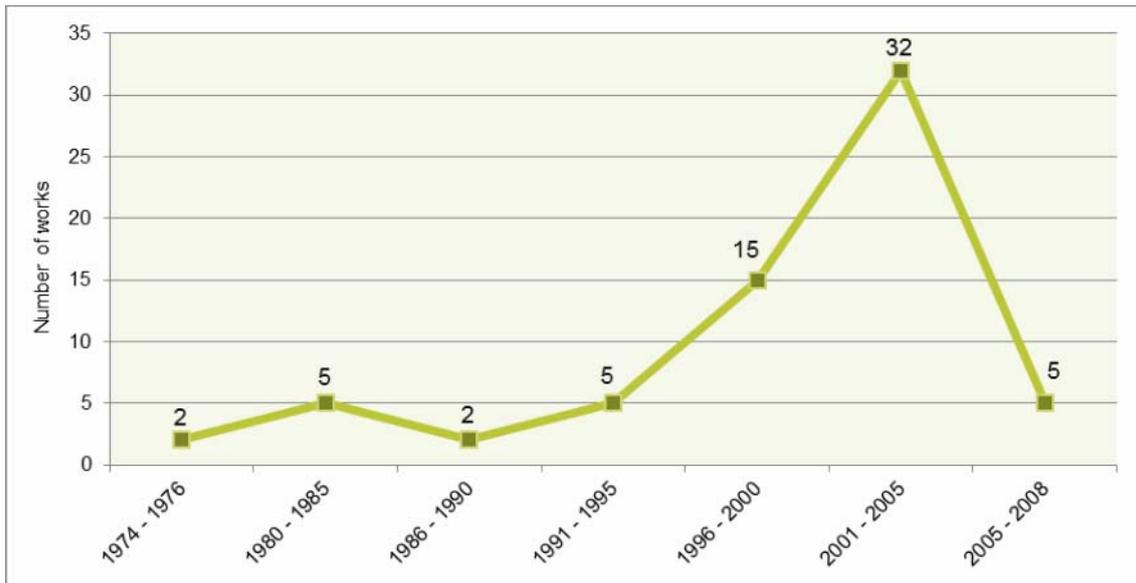


Fig. 2. Number of works recommended by the syllabus for Geography, by their year of publication

From the analysis of the topics of the *Didactics of Geography* included in the Syllabus, the following aspects emerge:

1) the 41 topics, grouped and structured by problems approached, refer to: the teaching-learning process of Geography (1 topic- 2.44%); the principles of the teaching and learning of Geography (1 topic – 2.44%); the curricular content of the subject (9 topics – 21.95%); instructional strategies used in the teaching-learning of Geography (9 topics – 21.95%); interactional patterns and class organisation forms used in Geography classes (5 topics – 12.20%); planning teaching-learning activities for Geography lessons (4 topics – 9.76%); evaluation of learning (10 topics – 24.39%); teacher-student relationship (1 topic – 2.44%); the Geography teacher as a manager and educator (1 topic – 2.44%) (Fig. 3).

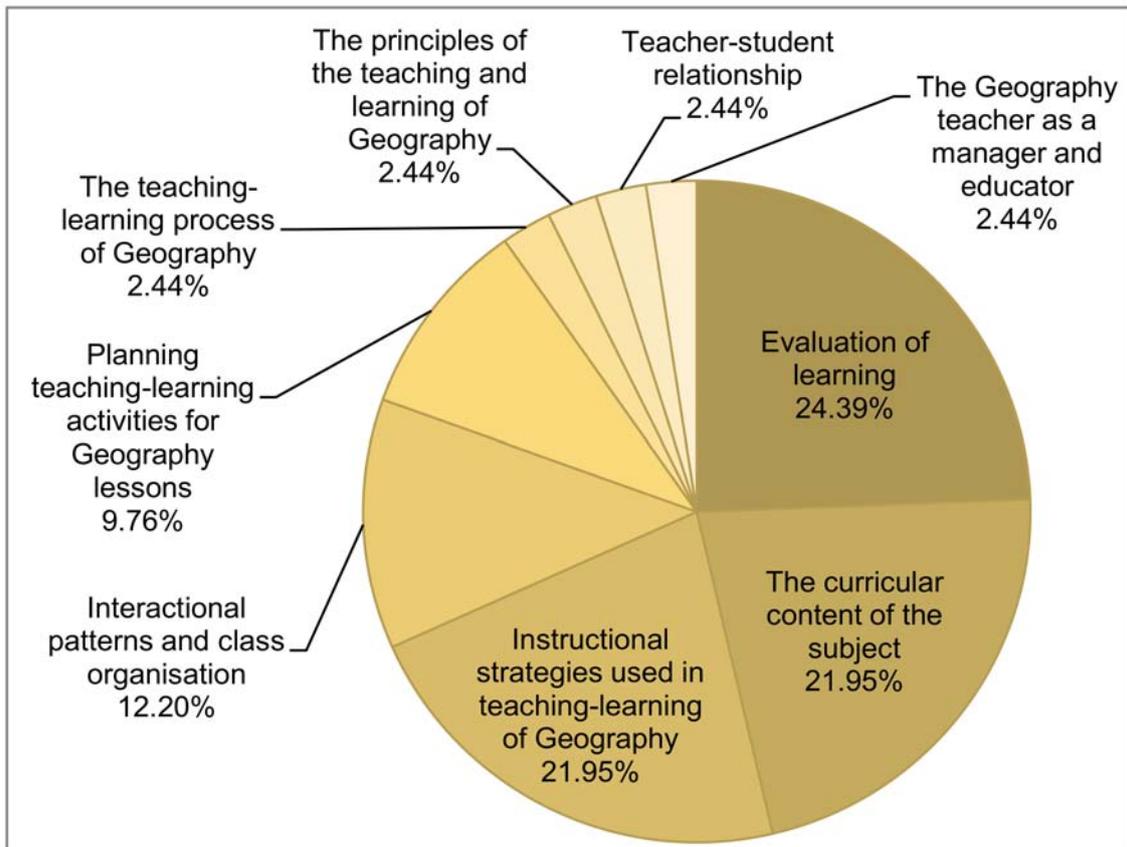


Fig. 3. Proportionality of topics on the *Didactics of Geography* in the syllabus for the exam

2) Several topics have a theoretical approach and are specific to General Pedagogy (e.g. *The concept of curriculum content and its characteristics. Sources and selection criteria of curriculum content. Factors influencing integration and hierarchical ordering of curriculum content in teaching Geography. School curriculum – defining concept and terminology. Specific terminology. The roles of evaluation*).

Analysing the list of references for the *Didactics of Geography* suggested by the *Syllabus* for the exam, we concluded that, in the total of 11 works, those published between 2001-2005 are predominant – 9 titles. (Fig. 4). Two of the publications approach topics of General Pedagogy and lack in examples taken from the *Didactics of Geography* (Fig. 5).

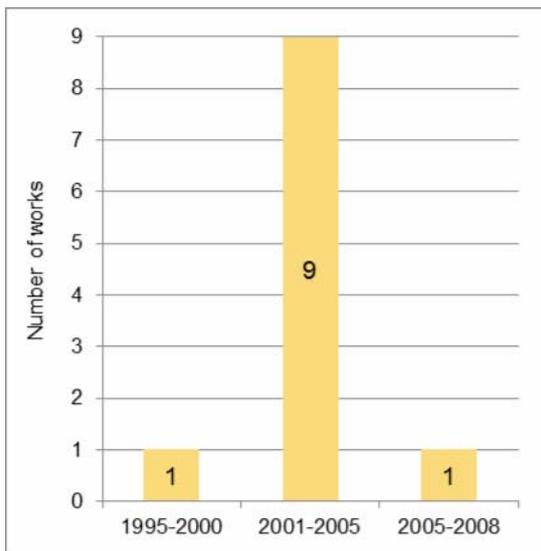


Fig. 4. Number of recommended references in the Syllabus for the *Didactics of Geography*, by year of publication

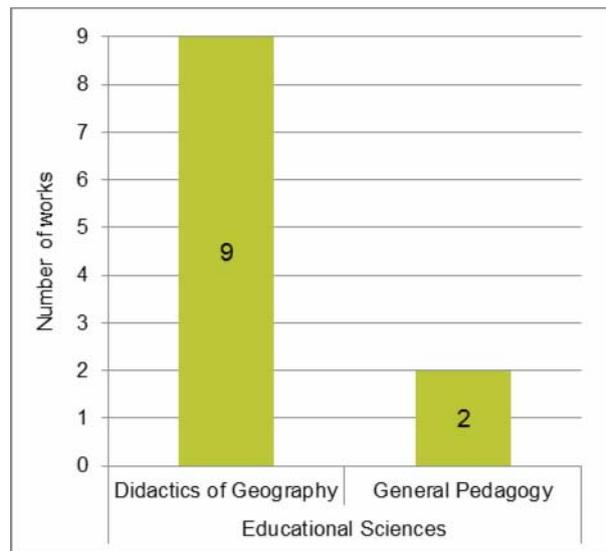


Fig. 5. Number of recommended references for the *Didactics of Geography*, from other certain sciences of education

We underline that the specialized literature in the domain by Romanian authors was much richer before 2008 than the list in the new Syllabus for the exam suggests and that this bibliography was not appropriately correlated with the topics included for this particular exam. In order to prepare for the test in specialist didactics, candidates are compelled to use other references that are not on the list of recommendations.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A FUTURE IMPROVEMENT OF THE SYLLABUS FOR THE EXAM

Based on the analysis of *The Syllabus for Postgraduate Didactic Certification Level II Exam in Geography*, the following changes are considered beneficial in order to increase the level of competence of the teachers of Geography in pre-university education:

1) the thematic for the specialist subject content for the exam should be by far better correlated with and adjusted to the curricular contents studied in the Romanian pre-university schools so that teachers are provided better sources of self-preparation for their daily instructional activity and to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of personal professional development, and career advancement, not only as Geography teachers, but as educators as well. The current school curricula should be considered as the basis on which the thematic list of specialist knowledge is devised in order to involve teachers in getting an updated, more comprehensive and deeper grasping of theoretic specialist knowledge with a view to improve practice.

2) For each branch of Geography, the list of topics should be focused on applied themes, clearly individualized in their formulation, of a smaller extent, lending themselves to information transfers for daily practice in pre-university education, allowing teachers and students to connect to reality.

3) The list of topics for geography and the Didactics of Geography should be correlated with the Professional standards for teachers in middle school/gymnasium education, holding a didactic level II certification, as well as the Professional standards for teachers in secondary school education, didactic level II (http://www.formare3777.eu/2012_GIMNAZIU_GRAD_II_Potolea_Toma_Stoca_3.pdf), even though these are only submitted in project at the moment.

4) The bibliography recommended for the exam should be correlated with the list of themes in such a way that it should be clear to any teacher-candidate what works and where in these works he or she can find information related to a certain theme or topic required in the syllabus for the exam. Since the postgraduate didactic certification level II is an activity for one's career advancement, the necessary context to guide all candidates for this exam is to study certain compulsory contents. We have often noticed that many teachers who took the exam had randomly read the works or content of the works suggested in the bibliographic list. Many of the teachers also stated that they could not find references to the themes included in list of topics for the exam in the bibliography recommended by the authors of the syllabus.

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