

**TEODORA GENOVA****CURRENT SITUATION AND REFORMS MAKING WAY FOR FUTURE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM OF BULGARIA: AN OVERVIEW****Abstract**

This paper on the education system of Bulgaria is aimed at presenting its structure, current situation, problems and challenges that it faces, and on-going reforms leading to some positive trends in the development of the national education sector. At the moment of writing this paper in the year 2015, we will mark the 1160<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Slavic alphabet, which was designed by the two brothers Saints Cyril and Methodius in 855 and was based on Greek characters that in its final Cyrillic form is still in use as the alphabet for modern Bulgarian, Russian and a number of other Slavic languages (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015). With the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union in 2007, the Cyrillic alphabet became the third official alphabet of the EU adding intrinsic value to truly multilingual Europe.

Key words: Bulgaria, development, education system, reforms, structure, teaching

**Introduction**

We pay profound respect for the two brothers Saints Cyril and Methodius, who are called the “Apostles of the Slavs” for influencing the religious and cultural development of all Slavic peoples across Europe. They were two Byzantine brothers born in the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Thessaloniki (modern Greece) who became prominent Christian missionaries. During their mid-ninth-century missions in Bulgaria and Moravia, they devised an alphabet known as the Cyrillic alphabet. The creation of a written Slavic language enabled Slavic peoples to organize complex political structures and develop sophisticated traits of thought. Due to the Orthodox writing and literature in their own language, a powerful Christian Bulgarian state was built in the Medieval Ages.

The Commemoration Day of the founders of the Cyrillic alphabet is marked nation widely each year on 24<sup>th</sup> May with the participation of pupils at all levels in the school system of education together with university students in festive parades. Undoubtedly, no one could imagine the modern system of education in Bulgaria without the legacy of Saint Cyril and Methodius. I would suggest that at the time when globalization and internationalization are irreversible trends in the development of education systems around the world, there are still given “local”, unique country’s domestic characteristics that stand out in the national context.

The main aim of the paper is to present the structure of Bulgarian system of education including briefly all aspects of it. In addition to that, the issues of governance and financing of education, current problems and challenges to the system of education, and ongoing reforms and policy developments will be discussed. An attempt will also be made to find how the implications of the key elements “quality of education, social justice and accountability” are expressed in

the national context. To what extent do these three elements determine the success of the Bulgarian education system?

### **Overall National Education Strategy**

The total number of all school pupils according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) enrolled in the education system in 2013/2014 is 1,020,542 including the number of pupils enrolled in private education establishments (NSI, 2014). The total number of all university students at both state and private universities for the same period is 283,294 (ibid). The system of education provides for the acquisition of the basic foundations and principles of human knowledge; the formation of universal human and national values, virtues and culture; the development of the individual and stimulating artistic talents and gifts; providing possibilities for needs and interest development for lifelong learning leading to self-development. Restrictions and privileges based on race, nationality, gender, ethnical and social origin, religion and social status are not tolerated. Education is secular and compulsory up to 16 years of age pursuant to the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. Education is free at all state and municipal schools.

### **Governance and Financing of Education**

The governance of the national education system is centrally managed by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), which is a specialized body of the Council of Ministers for the administration of education. The administration of school education is organized on four levels: national, regional, municipal and school level. The centralized type of education governance finds expression in some of the following characteristics systematized by Popov (2014, p. 155): MES exerts control over the activities of all kinds of schools and servicing units; approves the textbooks for each school grade and each school subject, issues decrees, statutes, regulations, methodological requirements; approves school curricula and syllabi that have to be followed by the schools. The regional inspectorates of education are structural bodies within MES and perform governmental policy and control at regional level, but have no regional autonomy. The school system possesses other distinctive traits, which add to its slightly decentralized character. Popov (2014, pp. 155-156) points out some of them, for example the right of the school principals to appoint teachers on their own; to make changes and additions to the curricula after they have been approved by the regional inspectorates of education; to independently operate with the delegated state budgets.

To add to its centralized character of governance, the education system remains predominantly state funded in a way that nearly 87% of the funding is ensured by the state budget (BEU, 2014). The second source of funding in education is from EU funds in the form of national co-financing and European grants with the largest share of private spending concentrated at the higher education level. The main aim of the state policy is supporting a financial system that encourages and stimulates the educational development. The execution of the financial policy unites two major approaches in financing: it provides all educational institutions with the minimum finances for covering their expenses and suggests more resources to be invested

where there is an already optimized network with all the necessary material, organizational and methodological conditions for a quality educational process.

According to Eurydice most recent data on education, the country currently spends 4.2% of its GDP on the education sector. This percentage is quite low compared to the developed EU countries, which spend, for example 7.9% (Denmark), 6.8% (Sweden) and 6.7% (Cyprus) (Eurostat, 2014). However, the percentage of the GDP spent on education in Bulgaria has been slightly increased over the last four years, as follows: 3.5% (2012); 3.7% (2013); 3.8% (2014); 4.2% (ibid).

## **Structure of the Education System of Bulgaria**

### **1. Early Childhood (Pre-School) Education (ISCED 0)**

Pre-school education is managed by local authorities, and is not part of the State's responsibilities, between the ages of 0 to 3. Small children aged between 0 and 3 attend nurseries or nursery groups at kindergartens. Between the ages of 3 – 6/7 it becomes part of the responsibilities of MES. The system of pre-school education includes children from the age of 3 to the age of 6/7. The main goal of pre-school education is to ensure the child's development by using educational interaction. The ultimate aim of the kindergarten is to offer the necessary conditions for the development of each child's abilities and to make them ready for school. Besides the state-funded sector, which is prevalent, the private sector is also developing. Kindergarten attendance is optional from the age of 3 to the age of 5. The 2002 Amendment Law of the Law on National Education (1991) introduced compulsory preparatory groups for the children at the age 6 to 7 years. The 2010 Amendment Law of the Law on National Education extended the age for compulsory preschool attendance for the children aged 5 to 7 (BEU, 2014).

### **2. Integrated Primary and Lower Secondary Education (ISCED 1-2)**

Within the structure of Bulgarian education, primary and lower secondary education are integrated into a single structure. Basic or single structure education (grades 1-8) includes primary (grades 1-4) and lower secondary (grades 5-8) schooling. Pupils begin school at the age of 7 in the year when they complete their seventh year of age or earlier, when they are 6 years old at the discretion of their parents, provided that their children are physically and mentally ready to start school (Law on National Education, amended 1998, Article 7 (2)). Basic education can be acquired at state, municipal or private schools. All schools are coeducational. Basic education can be acquired at primary schools (grades 1-4), lower secondary schools (grades 5-8) or secondary general schools (grades 1-12). On completing their grade 7 after sitting national standardized tests, students can enroll at vocational or specialize in a particular field of studies schools, where they finish their basic education and move on to upper secondary education. Successful pupils receive a certificate at the end of grade 4 for completion of the primary stage of education and grade 8 for completion of basic education, which entitles them to continue further their general upper secondary or vocational education and training (Law on National Education, amended 1998, Article 23).

### **3. Upper Secondary Education and Post Secondary Non Tertiary Education (ISCED 3-4)**

Secondary education is single-staged (upper secondary/high school education), lasting 4 or 5 years and leading to completion of secondary education. It is acquired

on completing grade 12. For those students who want to go further with their education it also includes successfully taking state matriculation exams. It is certified with a diploma of completed secondary education, which is final and entitles the holder to continue their education or vocational training. In case students decide not to sit for state matriculation examinations, they are issued a certificate of completed upper secondary education, which, however, does not entitle them to university enrollment. Upper secondary education can be general (offered at general and specialized study courses schools) and vocational. General upper secondary education is acquired at general schools (with a course of study of 4 years) and specialized schools (with a course of study of 4 or 5 years). Students are admitted to specialized schools after completing grades 7 or 8 and successfully passing entrance exams. Upper secondary education provides the attainment of the general education minimum and, whenever possible, profile-oriented training in accordance with the State Educational Requirements. Educational courses for vocational technical schools of 2-year duration studies are offered after completing basic education.

#### **4. Vocational Education and Training (VET) (ISCED 3-4)**

Secondary vocational education assures acquisition of secondary general education and acquisition of a qualification in a profession from the List of Professions for Vocational Education and Training in compliance with the national educational standards for acquiring qualification in professions. Vocational education and training at secondary stage is implemented at vocational secondary schools and general education schools that provide training for acquiring vocational qualification. Students can be enrolled in vocational secondary schools after having completed basic education (grade 8) and/or in general education schools for a vocational programme after having completed grade 7. Vocational gymnasiums and vocational schools deliver vocational training aimed at obtaining a vocational qualification the level of which depends on the duration of the respective training programmes. Vocational secondary education finishes with a matriculation exam and theoretical and practical state exams in the studied profession and specialty. Successful students in all exams receive a diploma of secondary education and a certificate of vocational qualification (EQF levels 2 to 4 depending on the type of programme). The acquired vocational qualification gives access to the labour market. Students willing to continue their education can apply for higher education schools and universities (CEDEFOP, Bulgaria, 2013).

#### **5. Higher Education and Adult Education and Training (ISCED 6-7-8)**

The system of higher education is provided exclusively by colleges and universities. In accordance with the Higher Education Act, they are all self-governing and autonomous institutions. The objective of higher education is to train specialists of high qualifications above the secondary school level and to develop science and culture. Currently, the higher education system includes 51 higher schools which are state owned and private, including universities, specialized higher schools and self-contained colleges. The management of the system is implemented at state administration level and at institutional level. The state is responsible for elaboration and implementation of long-term national policy and establishment of an environment guaranteeing academic autonomy of the higher schools, quality of training, and scientific research. The higher schools management is implemented in accordance with their right of academic self-governance. As a result of the active

participation in the Bologna process the following key characteristics have been introduced: three-degree higher education system: Bachelor – comprises two levels – “bachelor” (ISCED 6A) and “professional bachelor in” (ISCED 6B); Master (ISCED 7); Doctor (ISCED 8); a credit accumulation and transfer system; and a European diploma supplement.

Adult education and training is a state priority and takes many forms, ranging from formal class-based learning to self-directed and e-learning. Local authorities are responsible for framing adult education policies for their respective regions. Adult education is most often provided by licensed vocational training centers, as well as Trade Unions, employers, craft chambers, cultural centers and NGOs. Adult education is integrated in the general, vocational and higher education systems and is defined much broader as political and cultural education for active citizenship (BEU, 2014).

### **Ongoing Reforms and Policy Developments**

The education system has been undergoing incessant intensive reforms and policy developments over the last several decades in order to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requirements. They predominantly occupy the period between 2012 and 2015 as a starting point and are expected to finish until 2020.

The project of the new *Law of Pre-School and School Education* was introduced in the National Assembly at the end of 2014 stipulating a new understanding and vision of the educational standards and initiating a new educational structure. The basic education is divided into two stages: primary (grades 1-4) and pre-secondary (grades 5-7), and secondary education with two stages: the first high school (grades 8-10) and a second high school (grades 11-12). In fact, this project represents both an old version of the project of the *National Programme for the Development of School Education and Pre-School Preparation (2006-2015)* adopted by the National Assembly in June 2006, and a second attempt to reform the national system of education towards its qualitative structure. In a thorough research tracing back the outcomes of this national programme, Mihova (2007) asserts that “the National Programme [...] might be defined as the most radical education reform during the last sixteen years” and still vainly hopes “that by realization of these intentions our education system will have a legislation which will remove some of now existing shortcomings and contradictions”.

Earlier that year, in May 2014, the government adopted a new *Strategy for the Development of Pedagogical Staff*, covering the period between 2014 and 2020. Some of the measures include, for example, developing a united system for education and continuing qualification; legal assurance of the rights and obligations of professional development, etc. The Strategy has also outlined four operational goals connected with developing a united and coherent system for the continuing qualifications of pedagogical staff; creating favorable conditions for attracting, retaining and developing new teachers, as well as experts with a high level of professional training (BEU, 2014).

A new Operational Programme (OP) called *Science and Education for Intelligent Growth* has been launched. Its goal is to establish a very clear bond between the politics realized in the spheres of scientific research, education and pre-school education to the full spectrum of tools and measures fulfilled by MES. The

idea is the scientific infrastructure to receive most funding by the OP and give a bigger boost to Bulgarian scientific teams and organizations to participate in the realization of the separate schemes of the programme "Horizons 2020".

The *National Strategy for Development of Higher Education (2014-2020)* has been designed to lay the foundations for the transformation of the current national system of higher education through consolidation and restructuring of existing higher education institutions, to address the real needs of the national and world labour market and economy. Some of the Strategy's main goals are as follows: stimulating interest in higher education and granting broader access to it; encouraging academic mobility; building an integrated and effective network for scientific research activities and encouraging innovation in higher schools and research centers.

In October 2014 the government adopted a *Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education and Training in Bulgaria (2015-2020)*. The main goals of the Strategy are to prepare highly qualified staff to be employed by businesses, to prevent early school leaving among children from economically disadvantaged families, as well as to allow adults to receive professional qualifications in vocational schools and training centers. The Strategy envisions providing quality training through education and work experience, thanks to a partnership between a vocational school and training centers and one or several employers.

The main focus of the *National Strategy on Diminishing the Number of Early School Leavers (2013-2020)* is on ensuring equal access to and support for personal development in the system of formal pre-school and school education, as an early prevention measure. The main objective of the strategy is to promote cross sectoral partnerships in implementing integrated policy to guarantee an open access to education. Among the main measures is the development of a set of diverse incentives to prevent early school leaving which has a negative effect mainly on pupils from Roma minorities. Their total percentage is 12.4% in the year 2013 and the state is aiming at reducing this number under 10% (Eurostat, 2013).

The sector of education has undergone serious and widespread reforms aiming at attaining coherence with educational systems of other European countries. The main goal is to ensure the adaptability of the education system towards new perspectives, to guarantee sustainable system development in compliance with European standards, and to provide valuable and competitive knowledge and skills (BEU, 2014).

## **Problems and Challenges**

Despite the reforms in the field of education during the past few years, the consequences of the state reformative national policy up to date are related to the increase of the effectiveness of the education system, but yet not to its quality. Some of the major problems and challenges over the recent years have repeatedly remained the following: In the school system of education: aging pedagogical staff and the lack of interactive and innovative teaching methods; unequal access to quality education; great numbers of early school leavers; lack of effective national system for quality assurance. In the system of higher education: increasing number of university students and decreasing number of well-qualified academic staff; longer duration of Bachelor programmes compared to other European countries;

lack of coordination between higher institutions and the labor market in relation to the acquired skills and the skills necessary for job realization; insufficiently functioning funding system and low level of scientific research activities.

The total number of teachers working in the general school system is 45,093 for the school year 2013/2014 and the average age is 57 years (NSI, 2014). These data alarm for the negative tendency of aging of school teachers. Raising the quality of school education to a great extent depends on finding a successful formula of attracting young and motivated pedagogical specialists to the teaching profession who can bring more creativity in the classroom.

The official results of PISA 2012 have reported a serious gap between the pupils' performance in Bulgaria and those of the other European countries, although there has been a slight progress since the first PISA participation of Bulgaria in 2000 in terms of the three areas which measure pupils' knowledge – reading, mathematical and natural sciences literacy. The percentage of pupils below the minimum level of knowledge is 39.4% for reading knowledge, 43.8% for mathematical knowledge and 36.9% for natural sciences knowledge (PISA, Bulgaria, 2012). The level of school performance of Bulgarian pupils is directly linked to their social and economic status. Both pupils of Turkish and Roma origin and pupils from lower income families show corresponding lower levels of achievement when their knowledge is measured.

Every seventh child in Bulgaria does not complete their secondary education (Teach for Bulgaria, 2013). The high share of early school leavers will have serious social and economic consequences in the long term for Bulgaria. The largest number of children at risk is among the Roma population. "Roma children and teenagers are less likely to enroll in both primary and secondary schools than the majority population, and less likely to complete their education, if they do" (Genova & Cameron, 2010, p. 15).

Similarly to school education, the major objective is raising the quality of higher education. The total number of university students enrolled in Bachelor, professional Bachelor and Master programs for the year 2013/2014 is 277,239. The predominant total number of students receiving their higher education at state run universities is 231,019 compared to only 46,220 students at private higher schools (NSI, 2014). Over the last decade, higher education is characterized by relatively growing number of university students in contrast to pupils completing their secondary education, but decreasing number of university lectorates and researchers.

At the same time, the duration of higher education period of 4 years is longer compared to other European countries, for example Germany, where Bachelor programmes generally last for 3 years. A decisive step towards changing this practice is shortening the period of Bachelor programmes and combining them with more intensive practical training and experience. This could lead to acquiring the appropriate skills and competences, which are necessary for the labor market and young people's work realization.

The system of financing universities is characterized by a very low share compared to European standards of funding for science and research, and the inappropriate allocation of these funds. Financing programs for research and development in the country has the second lowest level among the EU member states with less than 0.5% share of GDP (NSI, 2011). The total amount of state

financial support for universities should be maintained, however redirected to undergraduates and universities with better performance thus stimulating the rise of quality higher education.

## Conclusion

To sum up what has been said so far about Bulgarian education system, in particular its multifaceted structure, ongoing reforms and policy developments, ending up with the problems and challenges that it faces, it can be noted that the desired level of quality of education is still leaving behind in contrast to its effectiveness, despite the good will of the state authorities to improve the situation. They are supported by the accountability of all the parties involved in the educational process – public officials, school managers, non-governmental sector representatives, teachers, parents, pupils and students, to raise the quality of education for every child anywhere, irrespective of religious, racial, regional, gender, social and economic characteristics. These mere aspirations can above all be socially justified for the sake of the whole society.

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