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Bulgaria

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The Reform in the Bulgarian Higher Education

The last several years after the passing of the Higher Education Act in December 1995 were years which were difficult and not without changes in one direction or another for the Bulgarian system of higher education in order to readjust according to the European model. Yet, at the dawn of Bulgarian democracy when the experts of the European Union and the Council of Europe, for the first time, had the chance to get closely acquainted with the Bulgarian educational system, they pointed out as its principal disadvantage its excessively high degree of specialization - both in the educational product and in the type of institution, where training is conducted in one or two scientific fields only. Despite the sound training of the graduates, this narrow specialization is an obstacle to easy entry into working life, particularly in the critical economic environment in our country and its transition to a free market economy. That is why, even then - in the beginning of the 1990 - options were considered for developing a more flexible higher educational system which would allow students more mobility within the higher school system to provide them with broader training which facilitates faster and easier adaptation to a rapidly changing and often unpredictable labour market. After exhaustive debates within the academic circles in Bulgaria, the higher educational model including three degrees - Bachelor, Master and Doctor - was adopted. It was first piloted in some universities and institutes - in most cases with support by the European Tempus programme - and later the Higher Education Act made it obligatory for all universities to align their educational syllabi with this model. At the same time and for more than fifty years, Bulgaria has been developing a unique type of vocational higher education (traditionally called college education). This was an alternative to the higher education of the university type and was quite popular and well accepted among the consumers of educational services. In compliance with the Higher Education Act, all the "semi-higher" institutes were turned into colleges with three years' training which awards the educational qualification entitled "specialist in...". Introducing the three degrees in university education and at the same time retaining the vocational higher education, (an area where Bulgaria was the only country in the Eastern European block with such traditions), is no doubt one of the virtues of the Higher Education Act.

Due to the continuing economic crisis and the stagnation at the labour market, some trends were observed in the country; to a great extent, these impeded the actual establishment of a more flexible educational system.

During the last seven years, increasing unemployment overburdened higher education with social functions and the number of students almost doubled. Universities were unable to meet this increased demand because they had neither sufficient material facilities, nor a sufficient number of qualified teachers. And, the state subsidy gradually decreased and reached its lowest level in the particularly critical year of 1997. Public pressure on the higher educational institutions was so high that the state took some measures to assist by giving them the chance to get additional financial support in the form of tuition fees paid by the students. So, again through the Higher Education Act, the so-called "paid education" was introduced and legalized in Bulgarian universities. Although Bulgarian citizens do not pay anything for the higher education of their children, in reality the total cost is met by the taxpayers. Things became more complex because of the fact that in Bulgaria there was a lack of financial norms for the cost per student, so the fees set were (and continue to be) rather arbitrary. This is also the case with the state subsidy which is determined not by the needs of educational process but by the budget proposed for the particular year. During the last few years, the funds for scientific research at the universities were reduced to less than 1 % of their budget. Despite the high fees charged, demand continued to increase and in 1997/98, the total number of students reached 243.000. Half of these pay for their education.

Again in response to the increased demand for higher education the state changed the status of the higher level schools, promoting them to universities by an act of parliament. This way, narrow specialized higher schools got the legal right to educate students in fields for which they had the necessary facilities and scientific potential. In essence, this led to the devaluation of the university as an institution and to heavy enrolment in the most popular fields of knowledge - such as economics and law, which is typical in a period of an economic crisis. The fact that, today, 25 % of all the students in Bulgaria study economics is indicative of the imbalance in the system.

The universities, in order to be able to accept the increased number of students and in order to attract more fee-paying students, began to open newer and attractive courses. This aggravated the problem of the professoriate's narrow specialization even in the earliest stage of education. As a side effect of this uncontrolled growth of the university, new phenomena appeared- i.e. traveling lecturers who lecture in several universities and a form of education where lectures are delivered most often in unsuitable buildings without the necessary libraries, laboratories and so on.

Alarmed by the uncontrolled growth of the university system and the increasing diversification of the disciplines, the authorities ensured that measures to limit the process were included in the Higher Education Act. As a result, a National Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of the Quality of Higher Education was established and a register of the specialized fields was prepared. The Higher Education Act obliged MES to organize and set standard state requirements for particular areas of study for which about two-thirds of the compulsory and the optional elective subjects were determined. Unfortunately, due to the increased commercialization of higher education, these measures have not led to the desired outcome so far. Furthermore, the existence of two categories of students in the state universities and the stated wish of these universities to admit more and more fee-paying students led to corruption in these institutions. The standard state requirements (more than 90 % of them are now ready) threaten to become an obstacle to opening new areas of study and for the development of the existing ones. This is because the prevailing ambitions of the academic circles is to maintain their status by including more and more compulsory specializations - due to which, the institutions have no opportunity for more flexible maneuvering within the limits of the various syllabi.

By an Act of the Council of Ministers, most of the former "semi-higher" institutes were turned into basic units of the universities and the college areas of study began to compete with the corresponding university fields. The universities preferred to develop the second type of training because it guaranteed them financial support for a longer period of time. As a result instead of taking the chance to develop vocational higher education as an alternative to the university higher education, we gave the impression that it was inferior. In 1997, only 10 % of the students were enrolled in this type of education. The decreasing number of students in colleges faces another problem - namely that the authorities have not included opportunities for a smooth transition from the qualification granted in these college graduates (i.e. "specialist in.....") towards university education which is considered to be superior.

From this brief analysis, it is evident that the problems to be solved in the Bulgarian higher education to render it more flexible and modern in structure are due to several factors:

1. Fee-paying education in the state universities which contradicts the principle of all citizens' equal access to education.
2. The imbalance in the numbers in higher education due to the uncontrolled growth of the higher education system. At the moment, 60 % of the students who finish their secondary education become university students. Recently, problems have become more serious because since 1980 the population has been declining and the birth-rate has more than halved. For the purposes of comparison, I will refer to two figures: in the last few years, Bulgarian universities have admitted between 51.000 and 53.000 students per annum and the figure for children born in 1997 was a little over 60.000. This fact means that in the next 15 years the number of the students will decrease more than two-fold. At the same time, the trend to reduce the number of lecturers is about 15 % per annum. According to the plans foreseen, during the first five years their decrease will anticipate the decrease in the number of the applicants. These are realities which we cannot ignore because of their negative influence on the quality of the educational process and on the quality of the very educational structures.

3. Misjudging the potential of vocational higher education to produce highly skilled professionals with rapid entry into the labour market. This type of higher education, together with vocational secondary education which also has good traditions in Bulgaria, form the natural background for the development of career retraining and lifelong learning which are of vital importance for Bulgaria in the period of transition.

That is why in the draft amendment of the Higher Education Act changes in the financing and evaluation of higher education are suggested. According to the universities, they are going to supplement their revenue by collecting equal fees from all students which will not be more than 30 % of the annual cost per student. The state keeps the right to change the relative part of the overall fee in relation to the average cost per student and the budget's potential each year. For this purpose, a competition is in progress to establish a methodology for calculating this financial norm in the different disciplines. The introduction of standard socially affordable fees is a topic of public discussion.

The second group of changes in the Higher Education Act aims at improving the efficiency of the evaluation and accreditation system of higher education in order to guarantee a better quality of the educational product and to plan a longer-term strategy for the development of the university system, which, in time, will doubtlessly decrease its size.

Special attention is paid to vocational higher education; the opportunity for transition from the college degree to the bachelor's degree will be assured, thus providing freedom for students to choose either type of higher education according to their motivations and skills.