

REFORMING THE VET SYSTEM IN BULGARIA

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Abstract. The development of the EU labour market depends on different factors: financial and economic crisis, globalization, demographic pressures, and new technologies. In the last decades there is a growing conviction that the Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a crucial factor for the sustainable socio-economic development. The EU initiatives, responding to the rapid changes of the economy and society, ask for modernization and improvement of the VET systems in order to increase the employment and the social integration and to facilitate the lifelong learning.

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In the last decades there is a growing conviction that the VET is a crucial factor for the sustainable socio-economic development. The EU initiatives, responding to the rapid changes of the economy and society, ask for modernization and improvement of the VET systems in order to increase the employment and the social integration and to facilitate the lifelong learning.

In accordance with the national and EU challenges Bulgaria has to find in a short term period the possible solutions for reaching a balance between the proposing of VET and the demand of qualifications on the labour market. Only in this way a real integration in the labour market will be reached, decreasing the youth unemployment and ensuring an intelligent economic growth.

The development of the EU labour market depends on different factors: financial and economic crisis, globalization, demographic pressures, new technologies. The achievement of at least three of the horizontal goals of the “Europe 2020” Strategy: 75% employment in the age group 20 – 64, decrease of the share of “early school leavers” from 15% to 10% and enhancement of the share of 30 - 34 years olds with post-secondary or HE to 40% is closely connected with VET and defining it as a national priority.

The main objective of the “Strategic frame of the National Development Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria: Bulgaria 2020” is raising the life standard through competitive education and training, creating prerequisites for qualitative employment and social inclusion. In the Governmental Programme the VET is

considered to be one of the priorities. Its reformation and linking to the labour market needs and the development of public-private partnerships are closely connected to updating learning content in partnership with branch organizations, modernizing the equipment, introducing “protected” professions (which are necessary for the economic regions and for the strategic economic branches), work-based learning and assistance for probations.

The main challenges facing the implementation of the strategic goals are:

1. Reduction of the number of students in VET. In the 2012-2013 scholar year the students are 25% less than in 2000-2001. There are different reasons – demographic, migration, social. This leads to decreasing the number of the secondary vocational schools in Bulgaria.

2. In the last few years there is a steady tendency toward decreasing the number of students in training for acquiring a lower degree of vocational qualification (second degree which corresponds to level 3 EQF) for professions which are demanded on the labour market. According to the National Statistics Institute data the number of graduates with professions with second degree of vocational qualification in the 2012-2013 school year is 20% less than in 2000-2001.

3. The main problems in choosing a profession are the pupil’s insecurity for employability after graduation and the possibilities for employers to recruit working staff without the necessary qualification.

The reforms in VET are connected to the envisaged adoption of the draft Act for Amendment and Supplementation of the VET Act with a focus on:

- helping Bulgarian citizens to acquire the skills and competences necessary for their personal development, successful employment and active European citizenship

- making the IVET system a more attractive learning opportunity
- enhancing the quality of VET
- securing the development of innovative-based tools and learning contents
- improving the links between VET and the world of labour
- securing the development of high quality and more flexible VET pathways leading to work or to further and higher education

- developing the role of VET teachers and trainers in relation to labour and learning changes

- supporting the integration of less favoured groups (migrants, older learners, etc.) in the VET system

- stakeholders’ more active participation and taking responsibilities
- coordination in applying the national and EU instruments for enhancing transparency, recognition, quality assurance and mobility (NQF, system for validation of non-formal and in-formal learning, credit system in VET etc.).

After its adoption the Act will regulate the opportunities for the application of the EU instruments determined in the Proposals of the European Parliament

and the Council for quality assurance in VET, validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and in-formal learning and the transfer and accumulation of credits in the VET system.

Each of the instruments EQF, ECVET, ECTS and EQAVET is part of a coherent picture and there is a need for ensuring a strong connection between the different instruments avoiding separate and uncoordinated development. In the broader picture, the learning outcomes approach is a shared language, mutual trust is the key issue and learners and lifelong learning are the two key points for cooperation. The overall challenge in the national context is the creation of a coherent national approach comprising the implementation of all the EU-instruments.

The “Strategy for reducing the share of early school leavers 2013-2020” has been elaborated and adopted by the Council of Ministers in October 2013. The Strategy is in accordance with the objective of the “Strategic frame of the National Development Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria: Bulgaria 2020” for raising the life standard through competitive education and training, creating prerequisites for qualitative employment and social inclusion. The strategy is oriented towards the realization of policies and measures for reaching the aim “the share of the early school leavers not to exceed 11% till 2020”. The early interventions and active measures against early school leaving are some of the key factors against youth unemployment and are a part of the youth guarantee measures on a national level.

The strategic and operational objectives of the strategy include: 1) policies and measures for preventing early school leaving in the period from early childhood to the end of secondary education; 2) intervention for restraining early school leaving, taking into account the specific threats on the level of the individual and following the principle of problem solving on the lowest level; 3) compensation – to help early school leavers in their new inclusion in education through accessible and diverse forms of education, training and the acquisition of vocational qualification.

The human resources preparation with the qualifications that are appropriate for the national economy requires new approaches in the VET area. The challenges the country faces should be taken into account in the process of their implementation.

A Draft National LLL Strategy (2014 – 2020) is envisaged for adoption by April 2014. The Strategy is a step towards a new innovative approach in education and training for the improvement of quality, providing an educational environment for equal access to lifelong learning, active social inclusion and active citizenship participation. The Strategy implementation will provide education and training in accordance with the needs of the economy and the changes in the labour market.

The partnership between the business world and different levels and sectors of education, training and research will help to better target efforts towards the formation of appropriate knowledge, skills and competences required by the labour market and to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship in all forms of learning. This can be achieved through the joint efforts to develop education and

training, adaptive to the needs of the labour market, and overall responsibility for the preparation and implementation of training programs, to improve the policy and practice of career guidance at all levels of education, training and employment, and to ensure the equality of formal education and training, informal and non-formal learning.

An important task is to promote the acquisition by all citizens of transversal key competences such as learning skills, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness, ability to work in teams, decision-making, conflict resolution, etc. The implementation of this task aims at ensuring a fully functioning knowledge triangle: education - research – innovation.

NQF

The National Qualifications Framework has 8 levels and 4 of them are covering the national VET system and are compatible with the EQF levels 2, 3, 4 and 5. The final national referencing report was adopted on an EU level by the EQF Advisory Group.

ECVET implementation

ECVET has a high potential as it concerns a number of major policy issues, such as validation of prior learning, recognition of mobility achievements, linking credits to qualifications, and the cooperation with other tools for transparency and quality.

The Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria received a significant contribution from the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit Organisation (GIZ), Germany in the process of reforming the VET system in Bulgaria through the implementation of the “EU-Integration of South-East Europe II. European Integration of economies and labour markets through TVET“ project in the period 2009–2013, with the financial support of the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany.

In the Bulgarian VET system some prerequisites available for the implementation of ECVET are:

1. The NQF, adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2012
2. The List of professions – comprises all the existing national qualifications. Each qualification from the List has its definite level and definite vocational area, with the respective codes
3. The National VET Standards have been learning outcomes oriented since 2007
4. The assessment of the achieved LO is made on the basis of criteria for assessment, which are a part of the National Examination Program for the acquisition of a vocational qualification for a profession
5. In the period 2010-2013 proposals were made from the MES for amendments and supplementations of the VET Act (1999) in order to create the necessary

conditions for the ECVET implementation in regard to the final and interim project results

6. Setting up a Working Group on a national level for updating the existing “Framework for the development of the VET-Standards”

7. Setting up a National coordination point for the ECVET implementation - the National Agency for VET

The new VET Standards are key factors for the reform of the VET system. They are a basis for the elaboration of a revised framework curriculum for each qualification, the creation of LO-oriented modular training programmes, the application of modular LO-oriented teaching and training methodologies and for the application of mechanisms and procedures for validation of informal and non-formal learning.

A draft national model of a new VET-Standard for the acquisition of a vocational qualification was elaborated through the application of the learning-outcomes approach, consistent with the levels of the National Qualification Framework and the principles of the European credit system for VET (ECVET). The model aims at upgrading all the VET-Standards and was created through the elaboration of new standards for five qualifications: System Programmer, Gas Technician, Electrician, Baker and Cook. Those qualifications are preferred by the students and the trainings are wide-spread in the VET system. Each standard contains the necessary LOs’ structured in units and described in terms of knowledge, skills and competences and assessment criteria for units. The draft model provides possibilities and necessary conditions for:

- assessment of units of learning outcomes;
- quality assurance of the assessment process;
- validation of learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal learning;
- transfer and accumulation of units of learning outcomes in the individual LLL process

The process of elaboration of modular training curricula for professions shall be finalized by the end of 2014. The training modules in the frame of training curricula will provide an opportunity for the acquisition of units of learning outcomes which are included in the new VET Standard for the professions and will serve as a model for the elaboration of modular training curricula for all the qualifications in the List of professions.

The creation of opportunities for the recognition of learning outcomes acquired in the VET system by the HE system is another important national priority, defined in strategic documents for the development of the education system in Bulgaria. As a project activity a mechanism for bridging the VET and the HE system is in a process of elaboration.

The close cooperation between VET providers and business representatives in all the project activities is extremely important and highly esteemed by the Ministry of Education and Science.

The main challenges the ECVET implementation faces are:

- the introduction of the LO-based curricula and training programmes requires a new design and new teaching approaches
- the necessity of trainings for teachers and trainers in the new forms of LO-oriented methods of teaching and training – independent and integrated learning, project work, group work, peer learning and action learning, development of critical thinking
- need for a close cooperation between school teachers and practitioners in the companies
- individual organization of the training process

EQARF implementation

A Model of a system for quality assurance in VET has been elaborated in compliance with the Proposal of the EP and the Council (18 June 2009) in the frame of a project “Skills for employability”. The project has been implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science and the British Council in Bulgaria. The results of the project - a “Manual for self-assessment of a secondary vocational school” and an “On-line self-assessment instrument” were elaborated for quality assurance on a level of a training institution.

Partnerships with the business

A National Programme for Modernization of the Vocational Education is being annually implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science. The Programme provides funding from the National budget with co-financing from the business being a factor in the preparation of a competitive and adaptive working force. Through the Programme a renewal of the specialized equipment of laboratories and workshops in the secondary vocational schools is taking place, in accordance with the contemporary new production technologies, and in these way opportunities for work-based learning are being created. With the annual continuation of the Program the cooperation mechanism and the shared responsibility between the state and the business for modernizing the vocational education are continuously improving.

The project “Pupils’ and students’ practices”, Component 1 “Pupils’ practices” under HRDOP, ESF, being implemented until the end of 2014 by the Ministry of Education and Science, aims at providing a quality work-based professional training for pupils, facilitating the transition from school to workplace, and enhancing the successful realization of graduates in the VET schools on the labour market, as well as creating sustainable partnerships between educational institutions and business. The project contributes to the establishment of a sustainable cooperation

mechanism between the VET system and the Bulgarian business, to the providing of work-based placements for pupils from the VET schools, and to the creation of sectoral networks of teachers and mentors for practical trainings.

The project “Career guidance system in the school education”, under HRDOP, which is being implemented in the period 2012-2014, will satisfy the need for access to qualitative informational, methodological and diagnostical resources for career guidance of all pupils from the first to the twelfth class in accordance with their abilities and needs for professional development and realization. 28 Regional Centres for Career Guidance have been established. A National Information-Seeking System for Guidance with instruments for diagnostics and consulting is being set up.

The system of validation of non-formal and informal learning is at a stage of being designed during the ongoing Project “New opportunity for my future” (2013 – 2014). The validation process in the VET system in Bulgaria will use the VET-Standards for the acquisition of vocational qualifications. Each VET-Standard for a qualification has its definite NQF level. The draft NQF will promote the learning outcomes orientation in the elaboration of the new updated VET-Standards through the level of knowledge, skills and competences and their clear definition. So the NQF level descriptors will serve as a basis for the elaboration of the required learning outcomes in the updated VET-Standards, which will be used as a normative basis in the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

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