

STABILISING THE LINK BETWEEN SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH LIFELONG LEARNING PROGRAMMES

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Abstract

At the heart of this report is the question of the relationship between secondary and higher education in the post-secondary situation. The focus of the analysis is the Bulgarian education system, as here the Covid-pandemic deepened a number of negative phenomena related to serious educational deficits. The introduction of distance learning into the secondary education system, although a necessary measure to contain the pandemic, could not compensate for the traditional forms of Education - direct teacher-student communication. The latest results of international tests such as PISA highlight new low levels in the preparation of Bulgarian students, both among those from the primary stage of education and those who are on the verge of completing their secondary education. It is yet to be analyzed how these defects of Secondary Education will be reflected in the Higher Education System. And more importantly, can they be overcome? Currently, students in the Higher Education are such a group of students who lack a number of skills and habits - communicative and professional. It has also been observed that their theoretical knowledge has not transformed into a sustainable foundation of their competence. So that the natural link between secondary and higher education is broken, higher education must quickly compensate for these deficits of general preparation. It turns out that the fastest this task can be solved by adapting lifelong learning programmes. First of all, to expand the forms of practical training by additional organization of qualification courses, by introducing productive attempts to acquire professional skills and competences – internships, brigades, practical expeditions and so on. Secondly, updating the three stage model of Higher Education: Bachelor – Master- Doctor, with the addition of practical activities, and this in the direction of increasing the duration of the Bachelor to five years - inclusion of additional courses to overcome the deficits from school education. Thirdly, expanding the opportunities for organizing short-term courses together with employers. The complex of short-and medium-term actions through the inclusion of the lifelong learning system within higher education will compensate for some of the deficits and contribute to the formation of the necessary professional skills for the future realization.

Keywords: *Lifelong Learning, Secondary Education, Higher Education, professional skills, competences.*

1. Introduction

This report focuses on the link between secondary and higher education in the postcovid situation. The Covid pandemic imposed a number of restrictions, including on the education system. The rapid introduction of distance learning in poorer countries like Bulgaria, with decades of economic, social and demographic problems, with severe regional disparities, showed that the education system - also in European terms - needs such a type of planning that guarantees the stability of the system even in emergency situations (Vasileva, 2019).

However, analysis of the education system in Bulgaria over the last three years shows educational deficits of students in the transition from secondary to higher education. And deficits in the fundamental preparation of the individual to orient and solve issues of the present and the future. Deficits affecting personal and social skills and competences. Humanitarian training of the personality, the acquisition of values through the study of history and literature emerged as a problem (Velev, 2021). The fact that books are hardly read is an acute problem, especially in poorer countries. In the search for solutions to these issues, it is worth looking at lifelong learning, borrowing approaches and methods to stimulate self-interest and personal willingness to compensate for what is not learned and mastered (Vasileva, Nusheva, Yankova, & Pavlova, 2018).

2. Observations on the state of secondary education

The state of secondary education in Bulgaria in the post-Covid reality is a reflection of a number of factors: economic, social, demographic. Statistics show that Bulgarians are the fastest melting nation in Europe. In just fifteen years - 2009 to 2022 - the birth rate has fallen by nearly 30% and the death rate has increased. For 2024, the trend remains extremely negative. (Bulgarian Government, 2021)

There are more and more experts who see education (both secondary and tertiary) as a possible way out of the deepening crisis factors. On the other hand, the changing technological environment requires a rapid adaptation of the education system: *employers demands on the workforce in terms of skills to work with new production, information and communication technologies, as well as knowledge of foreign languages are continuously increasing* (Yankova, Nusheva, & Dimitrova, 2017).

Next, education has been affected by the Kovid-pandemic, the result of which is very negative for the Bulgarian education system. Recent research has shown the instability of knowledge and highlighted a number of problems in social experience and communicative opportunities among students. Above all, the pandemic had a negative impact on students' skills and competencies in reading and mathematics. It is possible, in our opinion, that in the future we will discuss, and very seriously, the problem of the dehumanisation of the individual. And this is not just about the accelerated penetration of artificial intelligence, but about the increasingly relevant topic of reading and comprehension deficits as nodal humanizing factors.

Last but not least, the Kovid-pandemic has deepened inequalities in education. To a large extent, the lack of a clear economic programme to guarantee free access to the Internet through incentive measures has had a knock-on effect on social differentials, both within individual social groups and along regional lines - some are developed, others are in extreme poverty.

The introduction of distance learning in the Bulgarian education (Vasileva, Yankova, & Ivanova, 2021) system as an essential measure to tackle the Covid pandemic has not contributed to the sustainable development of education. The issue is not distance education, but the political unpreparedness and failure to adapt working distance education programmes to Bulgarian conditions. The lack of methodology on how to work with students of different ages and levels of education has proved to be one of the preconditions for today's educational deficits.

In Bulgaria there is a large group of bilinguals who, in the conditions of distance education, have not been able to meet the minimum national educational requirements related to reading skills, text comprehension, social skills useful in the knowledge society, etc.

A series of technical problems also had an impact: the majority of learners (pupils and students), as well as their teachers, were not provided with electronic devices suitable for distance learning. Also, in some of the Bulgarian settlements the lack of free access to the Internet did not allow for full learning. (Chantova, 2008) Additionally, the electronic resources of libraries - both national and European - were not fully free for use by all European students and trainees.

The educational system turned out to be unprepared for the post-covid situation as well - the deficits were not analyzed and identified in a timely manner, and accordingly, measures for their compensation were not foreseen. Although the first signal of problems in the general preparation of secondary school students came in the external assessment in 2021 - a relatively high number of poor grades, especially in bilingual areas. (24 Hours Newspaper, 2021). At the end of 2023, the negative results were confirmed by the international PISA study: not only have Bulgarian schoolgirls sharply worsened their indicators in comparison with the previous study, but they have performed poorly in reading and comprehension, as well as in the area of mathematical competence, traditionally strong for Bulgaria. (Ministry of Education and Science in Bulgaria, 2023).

3. Through the experience of Lifelong Learning programmes

As it is well known, Lifelong Learning is based on the understanding of the permanent need for new and adequate solutions to issues born from globalization, technological development, aging population. These solutions must ensure the full development of the human factor, preparing it for quality realization in rapidly changing and emerging professions . One of the most important differences of lifelong learning programmes is that they are the result of personal initiative, they are voluntary. The individual himself is aware of the need for complementary qualifications, for acquiring new or upgrading acquired competences. The documents obtained - certificates, etc., are often more relevant for one or another position than the educational qualifications. But, and this is also specific, without the relevant educational background and formed habits, upgrading with new competences and skills is almost impossible.

In Bulgaria, the Lifelong Learning Programme has been fully implemented since its inception in 2006-2007. In the period 2012-2013, the projects "BG-Implementation of the European Union Programme for Adult Learning"; "Partnership for Continuing Education and Training of Teachers"; NELLII - Network of Initiatives and Information for Lifelong Learning; days and celebrations related to lifelong learning have been organized at national level. (Lifelong Learning Programme in Bulgaria). A Lifelong Learning Strategy was developed and adopted in 2014. (Eurydice, 2023).

Work on the document "Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030)" follows, which attempts to implant lifelong learning as an integral part of the education process. (Strategic Framework, 2021)

Structurally, lifelong learning takes place in legitimate institutions. These include Vocational Training Centres, which by law can also exist in higher education institutions. At this stage, a more comprehensive analysis of the operation of the individual programmes at the time of the Covid pandemic is lacking. But in the post-covid reality, interest in the courses and the sacrificed practices is gradually being restored. (Tomova, 2021)

4. New challenges for higher education in the post-Covid reality

Currently, the generation trained and graduated in the conditions of the Covid pandemic is entering the higher education system in Bulgaria. It is yet, as highlighted above, to comprehensively analyse the deficits with which they come from secondary education. But, as researchers and educators in higher education what can be generally pointed to their training?

On the positive side, distance learning has improved their e-communication skills and their ability to quickly navigate the Internet environment. With the caveat, however, that they have not formed the habit of distinguishing between truth and falsity. In this aspect, they can become an easy target for manipulation. On the other hand, significant gaps are found both in general educational fluency, which prevents future specialized training, and in relation to competencies and skills, especially analytical and communication skills.

In relation to the acquisition of primary vocational skills - these were also a problem for the education system before the pandemic, but at the moment they are not developed even at a theoretical level. For example, the specialty of tourism trains students who lack basic educational knowledge, but also elementary professional competences. This makes it necessary - through the Vocational Training Centre as well as through non-formal education - to compensate both theoretical and professional training. It is also necessary to develop practical training - for example, to provide students with competences in professions that do not require higher education, but without which they cannot fully develop in the field of higher education. The example of tourism can be illustrated by the introduction of qualification courses for maid, piccolo, cook, etc.

Or another example. As a result of insufficient preparation in certain fields of study, for example, history or literature, students engage in courses, work in creative teams, projects and other forms of research and education to enable them - at a later stage - to obtain the necessary theoretical-practical preparation at the graduate level.

Today, therefore, higher education faces a new challenge - to find adequate approaches, to introduce programmes and courses to compensate for the deficits in the general educational preparation of students from the previous stage of secondary education, resulting from the unforeseen circumstances surrounding the Covid-pandemic. The most natural solution is by adapting approaches and programs from lifelong education to help address significant gaps from the very beginning of students' education. It is to be expected, however, that such use of programmes from another system will affect the structural, organisational and thematic characteristics of higher education.

First of all, it is necessary to expand the forms of practical training - by additionally organizing qualification courses, by introducing productive attempts to acquire professional skills and competences - internships, brigades, practical expeditions, etc. Secondly, to update the three-tier model of higher education: Bachelor - Master - PhD, extending the Bachelor's degree from four to five years. Reducing training, as is being pushed in some quarters, will exacerbate negative phenomena. Thirdly, extending the possibilities of organising shorter-term courses in conjunction with employers' organisations to make up for shortcomings in students' professional training.

5. Conclusion

As is clear, the post-covid situation outlines a number of challenges for the education system. This calls for a comprehensive analysis and a set of measures in the short and medium term to compensate for the deficits of individual educational development. As students trained in the Covid context are yet to enter

higher education, it is imperative that a large part of these measures be directed towards higher education, which should focus on introducing lifelong learning programmes that have proven to be effective, expanding forms of practical training and the formation of habits and competences, and introducing more immediate forms of communication and training for students.

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