

Why the Education Failing the Nation? Higher Education in Bulgaria 2024—Still Too Many Universities, Still Few Quality Opportunities

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There are less than 50,000 senior high school students in Bulgaria in 2024, but 51 educational institutions are vying for their attention as future students, with an impressive number of around 40,000 places available. On the one hand, for almost everyone who wants to study and does not go abroad, on the other hand, does quantity refer to quality? The topic is not new for the Bulgarian education system, what is new is that in the last five years, marked by global health, geopolitical and socio-economic crises: the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza, the financial recession in the Eurozone, controversial changes have been adopted by a series of five Bulgarian governments, the consequences of which we are yet to study.

Keywords: higher education, crisis, Bulgaria, quality, students, reform, politics, systematic innovation

Education in the Era of Fifth Industrial Revolution

How to Overcome Permanent Crisis Situation

The role and importance of education is perceived as crucial and it is present in the agenda of global programs for the development of humanity. In the context of globalization and the knowledge based economy, higher education is a generator of knowledge and a means of its dissemination. It is accepted as a major driver of national development for both advanced and developing economies.

The challenges facing higher education systems have grown significantly in recent years. On the one hand, the technological developments, change the landscape and place new demands on the academic community, on the other, numerous crises—demographic, geopolitical, health, economic, overlap and accumulate a greater negative effect on the education system. This dynamic significantly complicates the implementation of sustainable reforms and the maintaining of quality as they have a direct impact on national education systems as well. In the specific case of Bulgaria, the unstable political situation related to six consecutive parliamentary elections for the last four years and constant changes of governments and accompanying changes to the law on higher education, is an additional factor that has a negative impact.

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There are various approaches and tools applied to measure and evaluate the quality of higher education in Bulgaria which are in compliance with those implemented and adopted in the EU. The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency, for example, is a statutory body that has oversight functions and monitors the university performance, and can grant or deny permission to accredit a program or even an institution. Non-governmental agencies have more of an advisory function and aim, through the development of comprehensive ratings, to enhance quality and competition among universities and to improve the informed choice of prospective students. There are not a few academic institutions that implement a third tool—such as the international ISO standard, the scope of which is rather on internal quality management systems. Each one of these mechanisms contributes to the better performance of Bulgarian higher education and the quality of their activities. Each of the applied tools sets a specific focus and has a different scope of the measured processes. The general trend observed is that quantitative indicators prevail and the weight of qualitative decreases. The problem that has outlined in recent years is that rather none of the listed takes into account the others. And if, in recent years, the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science officially states that the rating system has become “a peculiar cornerstone in the development of the system of university education”, the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency, on which the functioning of higher education institutions depends as well as to some extent the financing of state universities, does not take into account the results of national rating system or the presence of ISO certificates. The Bulgarian Ministry of Education works on the integration of the different approaches but still with insufficient effectiveness.

Bulgarian Higher Education System Overview

Chaos of Opportunities

The higher education system in Bulgaria comprises of 51 higher education institutions, which according to the Higher Education Act are public and private, including universities, specialized higher education institutions, and independent colleges. There are 37 public higher education institutions and 14 private ones of which five universities, two specialized higher education institutions, and seven colleges. According to the National Statistical Institute the number of students enrolled in different qualification degrees in 2022/2023 academic year is 214,782 in total. The Ranking of the higher education institutions in Bulgaria for 2023 provides information on each accredited university in Bulgaria, as well as the professional fields, majors, and educational degrees (professional bachelor, bachelor, master, and Ph.D.) it offers. In addition, you can also extract indicator-based information on the selected university and on each professional field it covers. The largest concentration of higher education institutions in the country is in the capital city of Sofia, where 16 of the 51 universities across the country are located. The need for an overhaul of the sector has been commented on for years, but instead of reform, successive governments have introduced controversial number of changes, object of the following research.

Currently, the strategic public documents that define the agenda of higher education are:

- The Action Plan until 2024 for the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030), with the Decision of the Council of Ministers of March 22, 2023. It envisages providing support to vulnerable groups for access to higher education. In implementation of this measure, additional trainings will be provided to students from vulnerable groups from the second high school stage, with the aim of successfully passing state matriculation exams and applying to higher schools

students from vulnerable groups for the first year in the university. Under the Erasmus + program, funds are provided for educational mobility for citizens, including in higher education.¹

- The Three-Year Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030 (for the period 2021-2024) for the current year foresees support for the development of the academic staff in higher schools and scientific organizations, including increasing interest and improving conditions for doctoral programs related to the needs of the labor market. This happens through the support of modular programs and through the implementation of the National Program “Improving the competences of teachers from public higher education institutions which prepare teachers”. In the period 2021-2023, 18 projects under the procedure “Modernization of higher education institutions” were approved within the budget of OP SESG with the participation of 32 higher education institutions.²

- The National Map of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for 2023 with the Decision of the Council of Ministers of January 10, 2024. It determines the profile and territorial structure of higher education in the country by professional fields in accordance with socio-economic development and the needs of the labor market. The map provides information on the current state of higher education in the country and defines the guidelines of the national policies towards them. The information from the National Map will be used for the balanced development of the network of higher schools according to the needs of the regions and according to their real capacity, as well as for the further development of the system for state-controlled subsidized admission to state universities, in accordance with national and regional needs and with forecasts for future development of the labor market.

In the last three years under five cabinets Changes to the Higher Education Act in Bulgaria were introduced on 19 July 2022, on 3 January 2023, on 26 March 2024³. This simple fact alone comes to show that the concept is piecemeal, short-term thinking, and has to correct small defects in the system—such as awards and scholarships, development rules, student fees, but fails to pave the way for Bulgarian higher education to enter the age of innovation. In addition, besides the surplus of universities, there is also a surplus of ministries in Bulgaria and part of the work of the Ministry of Education is overlapped by the Ministry of Innovation, Ministry of E-Government, Ministry of Economy.

Among the failed but proposed reforms for the period are the one on the merger of universities (Cabinet Petkov, 2021), the one on the reduction of the administrative burden in the sector (Cabinet Donev, 2022), the one on the repeated abolition of fees for students in the state order (Cabinet Denkov, 2023), and others.

Of course, when every subsequent change in a law does not follow a long-term strategy, does not obey the needs of an industry, and proposes changes that are the result of the fad of the moment or fashion, the results are not good.

Desired Improvements in the System

Following Global Trends and Local Requirements

For there to be improvement in a system, not only does every component need to be in the right place, but they need to work like a well-oiled machine, which leads us to the next case study in the Bulgarian higher education system—private universities are better able to cope with the pre-Covid-19 period, the war in Ukraine,

¹ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/national-reforms-higher-education>.

² <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/national-reforms-higher-education>.

³ <https://www.mon.bg/regulation/zakon-za-vissheto-obrazovanie/>.

high inflation in Bulgaria, and political instability. The reasons for this will be given below.

Among the pressing issues repeatedly raised by academia and business, the following remain unresolved and are piling up:

- Changes which are not “piecemeal” to the Law on Higher Education, the Law on the Management of Higher Education Institutions, boards of trustees, doctoral studies, scientific metrics, attestations according to the specificity of the types of HEIs.

- Change of the Regulation to the commercial companies of HEIs and option for partnership with municipalities and business.

- Compliance with the HE Development Strategy in the period 2021-2030 and its linking with real legislative changes.

- Defining the types of HEIs, the criteria by which they are defined, and their funding.

- Defining and promoting interdisciplinary educational products and their accreditation.

- Defining “consortium”, “restructuring”, “merger”, “amalgamation” terms in legal documents.

- Defining the “network of universities” as a bottom-up structure enabling the creation of common interdisciplinary educational products and the possibility for students to obtain a degree by combining studies at different universities in the network.

Mechanisms to improve:

- access to higher education by Bulgarian youth at home and abroad;

- the quality of higher education;

- the higher education-labour market link;

- research through a share of GDP for science and development;

- the management system of higher education institutions through digitalisation;

- the higher education-science-business link;

- changing the requirements for teaching staff—flexibility of labour legislation and incentives for companies supplying HEIs and secondary schools with experts from practice;

- national criteria for academic staff appraisal;

- accreditation of HEIs on the basis of competitive accreditation of accrediting agencies in terms of accreditation of professional fields;

- revision and change of the funding formula for HEIs in order to avoid the remnants of the “money follows the student” formula (accounting for building stock, sports activities, etc.);

- CAE as control commission (superjazz) under dispute under procedure under HARRB and under plagiarism;

- partially centralized state management at the formation of scientific jury through the selection of external members at random;

- establishment of national prestigious publication databases (abolition of the monopoly of Scopus and Web of Science);

- reformatting the geography map for four regions;

- radically improved cooperation between Bulgarian and foreign higher education institutions.

And all this leads to a radical education reform, one that we have been waiting to happen for over 15 years now, so that the country can catch up with its economic and social underdevelopment in the region and the world.

Furthermore, on one hand, there has been a growing tendency for governments to promote greater levels of institutional autonomy, and on the other to require greater formal measures of educational providers to regulators. As it has been outlined, constant changes in the regulatory framework, as well as political instability, poor continuity of policies and strategies, political and economic dependences, have a serious impact on the system as a whole. A wide range of stakeholders are involved in the discussion on the expediency and benefits of the introduced reforms and their effect on the socio-economic development of the country. Business representatives and employers are taking an increasingly active position in this debate and presenting critical and reasoned opinions expressing concern and a clear awareness of the importance of the effect of the proposed changes.

As the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association states:

Currently, the higher education system “produces” a number of personnel with qualifications that are not in demand on the labor market, and the “overqualified” personnel with higher education work in jobs that require lower educational and qualification requirements or join the ranks of the unemployed, leading to a loss of human resources.⁴

Different business organizations require a unified state policy in relation to the admission and implementation of higher education graduates, in order to achieve a real connection of training with the national needs of the labor market and to increase the effect of the investment of public funds in higher education. They declare that the developed National Map of Higher Education remains a wishful document. Conditions have not been created to achieve a match between the demand and the supply of specialists with higher education through research, identification, and short-term and long-term forecasting of the needs of the economy. This creates a long-term risk for inadequate management decisions when developing strategies and policies in the field of the labor market and higher education.

The latest amendment to the Law on Higher Education foresees the abolition of fees for state contract students. This case is an example of an introduction of policy that is not agreed upon and supported by both universities and other stakeholders. At the same time, the changes will have a lasting effect on the system as a whole. The public debate on this issue was very intense. The opinions of various institutions were presented—the Council of Rectors, business associations, trade unions in the field of higher education. All of them presented very in-depth analyses supporting the negative attitude towards this proposal, but almost nowhere did they mention private higher education.

Although the proposal refers to public universities, its effect would have a lasting and negative effect both on public and private universities and on the socio-economic development of the country respectively. From the perspective of a private university⁵ the main criticisms of the proposed change is that it rests on formal, incomplete, and unsubstantiated reasons and impact assessment; applies measures of questionable effectiveness and efficiency, reviving policies that are outdated, unjust, and deepening social division, while ignoring world-proven solutions; limits the diversity of public higher education institutions with increasingly differentiated educational needs of students and suppresses the competitive pressure for their creation of quality educational products; wastes a public resource and ultimately will not solve any of the problems in our education sector. Rather, the root of the problems lies in the disturbed balance between autonomy and state

⁴ <https://bica-bg.org/en/>.

⁵ <https://www.vfu.bg/news/the-opinion-of-the-management-of-vfu-chnorizets-hraber-regarding-the-draft-decision-of-the-council-of-ministers-on-the-approval-of-the-draft-law-amending-and-supplementing-the-law-on-higher-education>.

regulation and the blocking of competitive mechanisms. Under the existing rules and decisions, the National Assembly and the Ministry of Education determine:

- the establishment of higher schools, professional fields, units, and territorially outsourced structures;
- who, with what, and for whom to do science;
- what educational products to create, at what price, and to whom they should be offered;
- who and how to manage the higher schools (the contracts with the rectors of state universities, the structure, and the way of management);
- with whom, for what, and how to associate;
- where and what the students should study (the state provides funding through the state procurement and subsidization of state universities, and the students naturally follow the money); what the university professors' remuneration should be;
- under what conditions they should be hired and at what age, in what order they should be released.

The development of the higher education sector is driven by centralized command mechanisms, not by the free choices and decentralized decisions of the participants in the educational process. The consequences are talent drain and shortage of human and social capital, weak incentives at the institutional level for modernization and development, inadequate skills, insufficient quality of educational products, irrational territorial and profile structure of higher education, which diverges from social and economic development and the needs of the labor market in our country, low competitiveness and absence from the world education map, with the exception of medical specialties, etc. The state must definitely support higher education, but not by suppressing competition and establishing state monopolies.

Government policies have played an important role in determining the framework and guidelines for the development of higher education. There is a clear neglect and underestimation of the role of private higher education in Bulgaria, despite the fact that annually between 13%-15% of all students enrolled are in private higher schools. The main focus of state policy continues to be on public universities without considering its effect on private educational institutions.

Conclusion

Balanced and Effective Future Educational Institutions

In recent decades, private higher education institutions both in Bulgaria and in Europe have proven to successfully adopt more efficient practices compared to public higher education institutions through better resource management. Private higher education institutions had to demonstrate an increased capacity to explore new market opportunities and to occupy market niches by using their higher administrative and financial flexibility and motivation.

Furthermore, they demonstrated a better and more balanced provision of higher education geographically and in terms of academic profile. The same should be taken into account with regard to the greater adequacy on the part of private higher education institutions in offering educational services and products more suitable for the needs of the labor market. What has been said so far is supported by the data, which provide evidence for the increasing importance of private higher education in Europe. If in 2000 the total percentage of students in Europe studying in private higher education institutions was 9.4%, in 2013 it grew to 13.7%. This trend continues to be maintained, despite the deteriorating demographic and economic indicators for the countries of Europe (Shah & Nair, 2016).

It should be granted that private higher education institutions in general are not automatically associated with a better and higher quality of education compared to public schools. It must be categorically noted that the quality depends on the specific institution, the field of study, and the reputation built up over the years, and above all on the management of the resources of the respective private higher education institution.

The main and most important goal for private universities in the context of the new global environment is to fulfill sustainable and effective management based on the balance between market-product-capacity-economic and social result. The focus of management and quality in particular is a project approach based on clearly defined processes, personalized responsibilities, and indicators for measuring results.

The challenge for policy makers and state authorities will be to learn how to use this sector in the best possible manner and to steer it in a way that may contribute to social welfare and to realize the social expectations regarding the higher education sector. This would be possible if there is a long-term policy that takes into account both the interests and commitments of all participants in the education system, if governments are able to develop an integrated view of the higher education ecosystem, in which public and private institutions would coexist and contribute to a socially relevant and effective higher education system.

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