

COUNTRY REPORT: BULGARIA

Bulgaria was among the first 29 countries that signed the *Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education* on June 19, 1999. As outlined in the Declaration, the activities foreseen will have a substantial effect on the higher education system in each country. The changes of the social environment and the demands of the market economy require much more flexible system of higher education studies and of methods for obtaining qualifications and degrees.

The Bulgarian approach in meeting the Bologna process trends could be characterized by **legal initiatives** oriented towards improvement of the national legal framework in compliance with the principles of the Bologna declaration, as well as with setting up of **new priorities** for higher education development, including measures for their practical implementation. The on-going reforms in the sector are also deeply influenced by the process of country's preparation for accession to the European Union. Since 1998 Bulgaria is in a process of active approximation of the national educational legislation with the *acquis communautaire*.

The main concern is to ensure the adaptability of the education system towards new challenges, as well as to guarantee sustainable system development in compliance with the objectives of the European Higher Education Area and capable to provide valuable and competitive knowledge and skills.

Following the examples given below, the legal base concerning higher education in Bulgaria has been subsequently updated in compliance with the *Bologna Declaration* principles as an integral part of the Bologna process. The changes made in the basic legal documents have significant impact on the overall qualifications structure and content, the education quality enhancement, the recognition process etc.

ADOPTION OF A SYSTEM OF EASILY READABLE AND COMPARABLE DEGREES

Actually the major legal documents regulating the national qualifications framework for higher education are The Higher Education Act (SG 60 – 2 July 1999, and subsequent amendments) and The Register of the higher education fields of studies and the professional areas (SG 64/02.07.2002).

The 1995 Higher Education Act brought considerable changes in the structure of the higher education in Bulgaria by introducing the degrees system. The subsequent amendments to that Act, related to the structure of higher education qualifications, are mainly oriented towards improving the opportunities for equal access to further studies, as well as towards increasing system effectiveness and internal mobility. For example, Art.42, par.3 provides to the holders of Bachelor's degree the opportunity to apply for doctoral studies. Its Par.5 provides to the holders of the "Specialist in..." qualification the possibility to continue their studies at Bachelor's level. One should also mention that the amendments to the Higher Education Act define a broader profile-oriented basic training of the Bachelor's programmes, and an in-depth fundamental content of the Master's ones.

Actually, the system of higher education organizes studies after completed secondary education with a duration of 12 years, covering the following degrees:

Non-university type of degrees:

Specialist in...degree is awarded by colleges after professional oriented studies with a duration of three years. Holders of that degree are given the rights to continue their studies at Bachelor's level or to access the labour market.

University type of degrees:

•First degree requires a minimum 4-year course of instruction and the graduates acquire the educational and qualification degree of *Bachelor*. Training for each speciality is finalised by sitting for state examinations or defence of a diploma thesis.

The newly adopted Register of the higher education fields of studies and the professional areas introduced the international framework of the fields of studies and areas towards which the Bachelors' programmes should be oriented.

•Second degree requires a minimum 5-year course of instruction, or an extra year after the *Bachelor's* degree, and the graduates acquire a *Master's* educational and qualification degree. Training for each speciality is finalised by sitting for state examinations or by defending a diploma thesis.

•Third degree requires minimum a 3-year course of instruction after the *Master's* degree or minimum a 4-year course of instruction after the *Bachelor's* one. Graduates are awarded a *Doctor's* degree. The higher school may train for the third degree in a listed scientific speciality for which it has been accredited for. Doctorands are trained according to individual curricula and should prepare and defend a dissertation. The training is carried out under the guidance of a scientific supervisor appointed by the Faculty Council of the higher school training the doctorand. Training for a *Doctor's* educational and academic degree can be also handled by such scientific research organisations as the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the Academy of Agriculture, etc. in the scientific specialities these organisations have been accredited for. The *Doctor's* degree is conferred on doctorands who have passed the examinations featured in the curriculum and have defended their dissertations under the requisite conditions and order of the Academic Degrees and Titles Act.

ADOPTION OF A SYSTEM ESSENTIALLY BASED ON TWO MAIN CYCLES

According to the amendments to the Higher Education Act mentioned above, the Bachelor's degree studies provide for basic comprehensive training, thus giving direct access to the labour market. One can mention that actually training for Bachelor's degree is one of the key issues of the higher education policy of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science. Curricula content foresees comprehensive theoretical knowledge together with practical skills and ability for theoretical and practical process and phenomenon modeling. The purpose is to increase both the adaptability and the mobility in compliance with the changing conditions for the realization of the graduates.

As to the Master's degree training, it is oriented towards in-depth fundamental knowledge with profile oriented studies in a given interdisciplinary speciality. The purpose is to achieve better comparability of the education level with the research one.

ESTABLISHMENT OF A SYSTEM OF CREDITS

Although the Law on Higher Education foresees the implementation of the modular structure of the curricula and of the credits for evaluation, their real implementation is a time-consuming process. In most of the cases educational institutions decide on the recognition of exams and marks acquired in other institution on the basis of individual examinations. Nevertheless, there is a trend to conform the national system to the European good practices in this field. The Ministry of Education and Science undertook several steps in order to accelerate this process.

Actually, the ECTS system functions in several higher education institutions. It is considered mostly as a system of academic harmonization and facilitation of students' and tutors' mobility and less as a tool for assessment. The 2003 draft of the Higher Education Act foresees adoption of the ECTS system by all higher education institutions, thus meeting one of the major objectives of the Bologna process in terms of increasing the transparency and the comparability of the higher education qualifications.

PROMOTION OF MOBILITY

Broadening access to education and mobility conditions improvement are also among our goals. Already in place is a system for unlimited transition from one educational degree to another.

We would like also to mention the stimulating of innovative thinking in education. To this end conditions are being created for "real market of ideas" through unlimited competitive participation in projects for financial support of innovative thinking at national, regional and European level. Approaches for innovative achievements in education, training and research are being looked for. The cooperation between the Bulgarian and foreign education institutions is being promoted, thus encouraging the motivation for innovative changes. However, certain obstacles have been encountered, such as: insufficient financial resources and lack of proper equipment, insufficient motivation of enterprises for participation in the educational and scientific development, lack of well-established mechanisms for coordination of transnational innovative activities at regional and European level.

Recognition is a *sine qua non* of the academic mobility. Usually, recognition of foreign qualifications is formally required in order to apply for further education or for appointments to research positions. Under the recent market conditions employers accept diplomas and degrees on a basis of the prestige of the respective foreign institution.

An important legal initiative facilitating the unification of criteria for recognition of higher education diplomas issued abroad is the adoption of the Law on the Ratification of the Convention on Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention) /SG 25 – 28 March 2000/. The

ratification of the Lisbon convention complements the existing legal basis in respect of elaboration of secondary legislative measures concerning the criteria and procedures for recognition of qualifications, concerning higher education.

In compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention amendments to several acts of the secondary legislation regarding recognition of documents certifying secondary and higher education acquired as well as periods of education completed were promulgated. The Council of Ministers Decree No. 168 of 14 August 2000 adopted an Ordinance on the State Requirements for recognition of higher education acquired or periods of education completed in foreign higher schools. By virtue of the Ordinance the procedure for recognition of higher education shall be organized and carried out by the Ministry of Education and Science and decisions on recognition shall be made by a Commission established by the Minister of Education and Science, comprising 10 members – persons holding high academic ranks in the basic scientific fields and 2 representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science.

According to Article 11 of the Ordinance:

“(1) The recognition of higher education acquired in foreign higher schools shall be accomplished upon comparing the data of the documents presented and of the requirements approved for obtaining higher education in the same and/or in a similar speciality in Bulgarian higher schools.

(2) The following indicators are taken into consideration in recognising higher education:

1. enrolment;
2. duration of the studies;
3. total horary of the studied subjects;
4. proportion between the horary of the studied subjects that provide the fundamental, the special, and the specialized education;
5. theoretical/practical horary ration;
6. graduation requirements.”

Furthermore, in compliance with Art. 17, Par. 1 and 2 of the same document, the National Information Centre for Academic Recognition and Mobility (ENIC/NARIC-Bulgaria) shall support the activities on recognition of higher education. The Centre is officially positioned with an Ordinance No. RD-14-189 of the Minister of Education and Science dated 12 September 2000.

Recognition of a study period of higher education is accomplished by the respective higher school where the student has submitted his/her application form. There is a strong tendency towards accepting the Council of Europe/UNESCO guiding documents /for example the Diploma Supplement/ referring to the recognition of qualifications and credits transfer.

The activities at national level related to the implementation of the Diploma Supplement are oriented towards development of an adequate legal basis for its official use as well as towards wide promotion of the document itself. The Bulgarian ENIC/NARIC center developed a detailed action plan for the promotion campaign. In December 2000 a national information Seminar on the implementation of the DS was organised. The main target groups were the representatives of the higher education institutions, the students and the experts of the Ministry of Education and Science. Different information materials and brochures were disseminated in order to assist the

panel and discussions during the plenary sessions and in the working groups. Actually the national ENIC/NARIC center regularly informs the academic community on the last developments. Another information Seminar took place in April 2003 in Sofia. Representatives of the Admission Offices of the Bulgarian universities were invited to make concrete proposals for the implementation of the DS at national level. As to the development of the legal framework a draft of the Ordinance on the content of the documents issued by the higher education institutions with a section devoted on the DS is in a process of approval.

The National Academic Assessment Commission recognizes *doctoral degrees* awarded by foreign institutions.

The Ordinance on the State Requirements for enrollment of students /Council of Ministers Decree No. 79 of 9 May 2000/ determines the right of foreign citizens, holding secondary education diplomas, which provide them with access to education in the higher schools of the country where the secondary education had been completed, to apply for the higher schools in the Republic of Bulgaria. Furthermore, Par. 3 of the same article specifies the terms and conditions for the enrollment of foreign students in Bulgarian higher schools under the same regulations provisioned for the enrollment of Bulgarian citizens. In accordance with Art. 11, Par. 2 and in compliance with Council of Ministers' acts and Art. 95, Par. 5 of the Higher Education Act, foreign citizens can also apply for Bulgarian higher schools under the provisions of agreements signed between the governments of the Republic of Bulgaria and another country for an exchange in the field of education, research and culture.

In October 2000 the Ordinance on the unified state requirements for enrollment and tuition of post-graduates has been brought into effect. It determines the terms and conditions providing foreign students with the right to apply and be admitted for tuition in the higher schools and in the scientific organizations of the Republic of Bulgaria. The above-mentioned Ordinance is related to Directive 89/48/EEC since the admission to post graduate education is one of the trends for realization in practice of the diplomas for higher education - on the basis of recognition of the higher education acquired in a foreign higher establishment.

National regulations on tuition fees for foreign students are another aspect of the free mobility. Actually, tuition fees for foreign students are specified by the Council of Ministers on annual basis. Taxes envisaged for foreign students shall not be paid by students, post-graduates and trainees entered by virtue of intergovernmental agreements where this issue is settled on a reciprocal basis.

The Republic of Bulgaria has stated its readiness - from the date of country's accession to the EU - to harmonize the terms and conditions for admittance of students from EU Member states to the higher schools with those applied for Bulgarian students.

The issue of qualifications award by a legally established and accredited higher education institution shall be outlined as a necessary pre-condition for recognition of qualification or education obtained at national level. The Bulgarian ENIC/NARIC Centre accomplishes the certification of all national qualifications destined for the external evaluation by foreign institutions, thus assisting the competent authorities of

the other countries in their final decision.

PROMOTION OF EUROPEAN COOPERATION IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

Under this heading, quality of education and training is one of our main objectives. Substantial progress has been made through working out of new curricula and educational standards in compliance with the economic and social changes. Contemporary quality assessment schemes both for secondary and higher schools are in the process of elaboration. The institutions themselves show increasing responsibility for the quality of education they are offering. New technologies are being introduced in the training process. However, we encounter certain difficulties, related to: the natural conservatism of the system itself, which slows down the rate of the reform; insufficient harmonization between the changes for increasing the quality and changes related to the administrative infrastructures; slow adaptation of the academic staff towards the new requirements for knowledge and training; insufficiently developed system for information exchange educational processes in the region inclusive.

Among the main tasks and objectives of the national education systems are the promotion and support of the quality of education. The quality of education has a direct influence on the matters related to the mutual recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications. Therefore, during the last year special attention has been given to the problem of establishing reliable systems for an internal assessment. The Rules governing the activity of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) were updated /CM Decree No. 106 of 19 June 2000/

The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) established in 1996 /last amendments Council of Ministers Decree No. 106 of 19 June 2000/ is the national quality assessment body in respect of the higher education system in Bulgaria. Its main functions can be summarized as follows:

- NAEA evaluates and awards accreditation to legally established higher education institutions. It is in Agency's competence to withdraw courses or study programmes that do not correspond to the state requirements adopted. The Agency has also the right to propose changes in the legal status of institutions following a negative accreditation assessment.
- NAEA also evaluates the higher education institutions study programmes. It has the right to withdraw state recognition for particular programmes that do not satisfy the requirements with respect to curricula, academic staff, physical infrastructure, etc.

Provision and guaranteeing the quality of education are considered as one of the requirements of primary importance for the development of the national education system that is relevant also to the issues of mutual recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications. Therefore, special attention has been given to the problem of establishing reliable systems for internal evaluation. To this effect the Rules governing the activity of the National Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation (NAEA) has been updated and a Center "Competitive system for training and management of higher education" has been established.

Currently, the focus is placed on the necessity for transparent qualifications, study-courses and curricula. One of the main reasons for concentrating efforts to this effect

is the concern of higher education institutions and the state authorities regarding the quality of education in certain specialities and institutions. The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency was established to monitor and to assure the quality in the higher education sector. Development of tailor-made study programmes and qualifications that correspond to the interests of individual students may be expected in the future. Nevertheless, the current legislation allows for individualized curricula and greater choice of courses for students with higher academic achievements. Most higher education institutions provide such opportunities though to a limited number of students.

PROMOTION OF THE EUROPEAN DIMENSIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The educational community in Bulgaria is actively participating in different European activities and programmes progressively opened up to the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Starting with PHARE and TEMPUS, whose objective is to promote education quality and support institutional development, Bulgaria is actually fully participating in different programs such as SOCRATES, CEEPUS, LEONARDO DA VINCI. For Bulgaria these programmes mark the beginning of different European initiatives in the areas of education and training, thus giving the country the unique chance to gain a better understanding of common educational policies and to gather valuable experience.

With Council of Ministers Decision No. 8 of 10 January 2000 a Human Resources Development Centre was established. The activity of this centre includes dissemination of information regarding the programmes, objectives and priorities of the EU in the field of education and training, the effective participation in the Community Programmes and the preparation of basic documents and studies on different topics.

On the other hand, our efforts towards integration at European level require a large scale of practical measures oriented towards the improvement of our educational system, thus providing the basis of a new approach for facing the future challenges of that process.

LIFELONG LEARNING

In compliance with the European priorities we are developing lifelong learning (LLL). Thus conditions for greater diversification of educational specialities have been created together with full-flesh compatibility of the educational programs with customers' needs. Variety of forms of education have been offered to those wishing to continue their education. Lifelong learning is considered from national perspective as one of the major factors in improving the professional activity of people and in provoking active citizenship.

The policy of the Bulgarian government concerning human resources is a component of the overall social policy directed towards building up of a society of learning and knowledge, towards broadening the European cooperation in education, research, culture and technology, in free movement of workers. This policy is stipulated in:

- National plan for economic development 2001, Part IV – Human Resources Development, sector on labour market, employment and professional qualification of adults – employed and unemployed;

- National action plan on employment 2001;
- National strategy on human resources development 2006;
- National and regional projects and programmes on employment and professional qualification.

A specific legislation concerning LLL has not been elaborated yet. The legal basis is provided for in:

- The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (1991)

The lifelong education and training is a right guaranteed to the citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria. Art. 53, Para. 1 – “Each person shall be given the right of education;” Art. 53, Para. 6 – “The state shall promote education, ... shall create conditions for vocational training and retraining;” Art. 48, Para. 3 – “Each citizen shall choose freely his/her profession and place of work.”

- The Labour Code (2001)

The Labour Code stipulates general norms concerning the right of education in the context of the LLL as provided for the active population. According to Art. 3, Para. 1 “the state shall regulate in-service and insurance relations as well as matters concerning the state of living in collaboration and upon consultations with nationally representative organizations of workers and servants and of employers.”

Within the system of higher education LLL is regulated through the Higher Education Act. The Law regulates the tuition of highly qualified specialists with secondary education acquired, the independence of higher education in respect of ideological, religious and political doctrines.

The changes in the national education system regulated by the renewed legal framework are directed towards the 1997 amendments to the Law on Higher Education and the reform of the higher education related to implementation of wide-profiled Bachelor Degree which provides conditions for accomplishment of the main goal of the Strategy for developing higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria, namely: *“To improve the quality of education and conformity of the higher education system with the social and economic requirements while preserving the accessibility and increasing the equality of opportunities to acquire higher education.”* Taking into account the last developments at European level a substantial updating of the Strategy is foreseen.

The Law on Higher Education was being amended with the purpose to overcome the unfavorable trends in the system of higher education in 1999. As from the academic year 1999/2000 all studies have become subsidized by the state budget. Conditions for gradually regulation of the enrollment were created. (The number of the dropouts in the system of higher education varies within 5% to 7%). Several legislative changes have been adopted to facilitate the tuition for Doctor’s Degree: the possibility for enrollment upon Bachelor degree completed, the cancellation of the minimal fee of education during the last two years of the Doctor’s Degree studies, the withdrawal of the age-limit for enrollment and the provision of scholarships for Doctor's degree students amounting of the two minimal salaries.¹

¹ The number of Doctoral students approved is quite equal as for 1996/1997 academic year – 861, while for the 2000/2001 academic year it amounts at 840. It should be taken into consideration that 50% of the students admitted for the academic year 1999/2000 were paid students.

In the sector of higher education the implementation in 1995 of the degrees by profession and qualification (Specialist in, Bachelor, Master) and of the Doctor Degree provided opportunity for further liberalization of the system. There exist mechanisms for upgrading and acquiring higher degrees through completing courses for higher degree by profession and qualification or through attending courses for different types of specialisations within the frame of one and the same degree by profession and qualification. Elaboration of individual curricula, which respond to the interests of each student could be expected in near future. Nevertheless, the actual legislation provides opportunities for individual curriculum and high level of eligibility of courses for the students with high academic achievements.

The main challenges and obstacles related to the sector of higher education in respect of the renewal of the education process could be summarized as follows:

- Most HEIs in Bulgaria do not carry out proactive policies in attracting LLL students.
- The legislative and regulation basis for degree and non-degree courses does not offer sufficient incentives for HEIs to engage in lifelong learning activities.
- Under the conditions of financial constraints the self-funding mechanisms for LLL course development and delivery are not well developed.
- The ICT infrastructure in HEIs needs further development.
- HEIs do not allways have well designed marketing strategies for extending the educational services for lifelong learning.
- There is no specific funding from national sources for the development of ODLL courses and e-learning.
- The interaction between HEIs and social partners – enterprises, public administration, NGOs – with respect training activities is not at the necessary level².
- The pedagogical approaches used in LLL courses are often outdated and the outcomes of the studies do not meet the expectations of lifelong learners.

Clearly defined and completely elaborated mechanisms for recognition of “non-traditional” qualifications are not yet established. In fact, the skills and knowledge acquired through non-traditional courses and forms of education in the most cases are not formally accepted. Extramural students have considerably short lecture-course attendance in comparison to the regular ones. In this case it has been considered that the work experience of extramural students compensates the reduced lecture courses.

It could be considered that LLL-students will acquire qualification through non-tradition forms of education. Development in this direction could be expected upon wide implementation of the modular type of curricula and credit system. Actually, the necessary institutional structures for LLL implementation are established in all higher education institutions in Bulgaria. These structures function within a network, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Science. Another aspect is the wider dissemination of the LLL concept at national level. The last event was the International Conference on Lifelong Learning held in Sofia in November 2002.

² However, substantial progress for active inclusion of the social partners has been recently made. Their representatives were involved in the discussion on national level of the development of professional educational standards (April 2003)

The system of higher education in Bulgaria has a long experience in introducing new information technologies.. Meanwhile, in this field exist certain obstacles connected with the lack of necessary equipment. In general, there is a trend to train all the students in computer literacy. For example, the draft of the Ordinance for acquiring higher education through distance learning foresees active and target-oriented development of ICT skills.

The access to higher education has been broadened through establishing new units spread all over the country.³ On the other part, this practice induces a decrease of the quality of students' preparation. This trend imposes the necessity of measures to be taken in order to optimize the net of the high schools in the country.

Another initiative is the development of different forms of distance learning. Distance learning was introduced in 1995 with the Law on Higher Education. In practice there have been established a National Centre for Distance Education and a net of 4 regional and 16 supplementary Centres for Distance Education as well as 4 Master programmes and more than 50 post-graduated courses for qualification.⁴

The lack of legislative regulation is a serious obstacle for the development of new methods of distance learning. Till now more than 3 000 students have been trained in different courses and programmes organized by the distance education centres (**DEC**). The existing problems could be overcome through introducing educational standards.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND STUDENTS

The shaping of the European Higher Education Area is a joint responsibility of both education policy-makers and academic representatives. Thus the Ministry of Education and Science makes a lot of efforts to keep the Bulgarian academic and student community well informed on the development of the Bologna process. Among the initiatives we would like to mention the regularly organized information seminars such as "The Bulgarian Approach in Facing the Bologna Process Challenges", "Quality and Recognition: Joint Objectives and Prospectives", "Joint Degrees Development within the Context of the European Integration". Different information materials and publications were regularly produced and disseminated on national and regional level.

The cost-efficiency of the educational processes is another concern of ours. We are trying to strike a balance between the public resources allocated for education and the refundability for the society and the individual. We have so far achieved autonomy of the higher education institutions. We are also aiming at bettering of the interaction with the economy and the business circles. Despite of our efforts, some obstacles have to be overcome, such as: discrepancy between the state funding and the constantly increasing number of students; local dispersement of educational institutions which contradicts the world tendency of their unification in view of increasing the cost efficiency.

³ In the Republic of Bulgaria there are 47 high school, 39 of which are state school and 8 are private. The structures in the system of higher education, incl. high schools, their branches, independent colleges, is in total 91 dispersed in 26 towns.

⁴ Bulgaria was one of the 13 countries participating in the project of the multinational PHARE programme for Distance Education. This programme is a good example for targeted financing with multiple effect for the system of higher education. The National Centre and the 4 regional centres are equipped with modern ICT.

A Centre “Competitive system for training and management of higher education” has been established. The Centre shall facilitate the reforms within the higher education system by accomplishing certain activities directed towards ensuring successful management of the higher schools, improving study process quality and updating the curricula and syllabus, introducing new forms of tuition. The Centre shall fulfill these tasks by evaluating, approving and financing projects aimed at modernization of higher education. Its structure, functions and activities shall be regulated by Rules promulgated and approved by the Minister of Education and Science.

With regard to the further development of the Bologna process, the Bulgarian academic community faces several basic objectives:

- Quality assurance of all programmes in compliance with the labor market and European dimensions of education
- Innovation in teaching and learning methods including lifelong learning tendencies
- Raising the scope of academic autonomy by entrusting more responsibility to higher education institutions
- New schemes of funding higher education institutions, resources allocation and student support
- Research activities under business initiatives and private funding
- Improvement of evaluation procedures transferring a part of evaluation criteria to achievements measurement.