EU MEMBERSHIP OF BULGARIA 2007-2014: THE BENEFITS FOR THE SPHERE

 OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

 ЧЛЕНСТВОТО НА БЪЛГАРИЯ В ЕВРОПЕЙСКИЯ СЪЮЗ 2007-2014: ПОЛЗИТЕ

 ЗА СФЕРАТА НА ОБРАЗОВАНИЕТО И НАУКАТА

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**Abstract**

The article aims at considering the benefits of the EU membership for the educational and scientific sectors in Bulgaria. Based on the EU common strategy within these spheres, the Bulgarian priorities are dealt with through the European dimension and the current trends and policies. Then, the opportunities for reforming and improvement are discussed including the good example set by UNWE-the leading university in Bulgaria.

**MENU**

EU strategy, priorities and tools

Bulgaria: benefits and recommendations

Showcase: UNWE

Becoming a full-fledged member of the EU involves a host of reforms, adjustments and legislative harmonisation. Regarding chapters 17: Science and research and chapter 18: Education and training Bulgaria committed itself to taking over and implementing the acquis under both chapters as from the date of accession. This involvement implied the carrying out of reforms aimed at modernisation, necessary improvements and changes.

Based on the Lisbon Strategy as well as on the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union Bulgaria was expected to lay the foundations of higher educational standards and to focus on education, training and youth programmes in order to provide for a knowledge-based economy and society with a highly qualified and adaptable population. Thus, social cohesion and active citizenship within the EU would be strengthened. The promotion of mobility and the encouragement of cooperation are seen as the main drives for the development of the European dimension.

The period 2007-2014 was characterised by the emphasis on the implementation of the European framework for key competences as well as the development of national lifelong learning strategies, the reform of the vocational education and training (VET) systems and the modernising of higher education.

The eight key competences for lifelong learning are:

* Communication in the mother tongue
* Communication in foreign languages
* Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
* Digital competence
* Learning to learn-the ability to organize and pursue one’s own learning
* Social and civic competences
* Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
* Cultural awareness and expression

‘All these competences are interdependent and contribute to the individual’s ability for critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem solving, risk assessment, decision taking and constructive management of feelings.’Recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament.

All changes, reforms and developments in the fields of education, training and innovation for the period 2007-2014 were based on the ‘Education and training 2010’ work programme, the lifelong learning programme 2007-13, the Erasmus Mundus 2009-2013 action programme and the European Area of Higher Education (the Bologna process), with the objective of making education and training a global quality benchmark by 2010 and of focusing on learning foreign languages in line with the conclusions of the Barcelona European Council of 2002.

 The lifelong learning programme 2007-13 encompassed all the European programmes in the field of lifelong learning and was based on the previous programmes Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, eLearning and the Jean Monnet action. The programme aimed at the greater interaction between the different areas, better cooperation and mobility between education and training systems within the Community, promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity, interchange fostering. The action programme was divided into six sub-programmes, four of which were sectoral. They were all structured in the same way and addressed the teaching and learning needs of all participants, as well as of the institutions and organisations providing or facilitating education and training in each respective sector. All the actions incorporate mobility, language and new technology:

* **Comenius**
* **Erasmus**
* **Leonardo da Vinci**
* **Grundtvig**
* **The transversal programme**
* **The Jean Monnet programme**

The Erasmus Mundus 2009-2013 action programme was established for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries.

During the period 2007-09 the work programme‘Education and training 2010’ was implemented. Owing to this programme, policy cooperation at the European level provided valuable support to countries' educational reforms and education and training performance in the European Union (EU) improved. There was significant progress regarding school curricula and in giving transversal key competences a more prominent part. However, additional efforts were needed to update the skills and competences of teachers and to provide professional development opportunities for school leaders. There was a concern for EU countries to further develop their vocational education and training systems in order to address the full range of key competences more systematically. Measures were taken to increase adult participation in education and training as well as to improve the competences of adult education teachers.

The three main priorities of the programme were lifelong learning strategies, vocational education and training and higher education. Let us consider Bulgaria’s performance with regard to these priorities.

**Lifelong learning strategies**

Bulgaria has adopted lifelong learning strategies, which provide for flexible learning pathways. It also progressed in the development of national qualifications frameworks linked to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and covering all levels and types of education and training.

**Vocational education and training (VET)**

The Copenhagen process provides for enhanced European cooperation on VET, with a view to improving the attractiveness and quality of VET systems. Two main issues were addressed- the professionalisation of VET teachers and making VET more adaptable to the needs of learners and businesses. Our country had to work for a closer cooperation between VET and the business world, for a more work-based training complementing the school-based one and for the development of tools for anticipating future skill needs. As a result school programmes and curricula were reviewed and updated, emphasis was put on teacher mobility and training, partnerships with business were established and strengthened.

**Higher education**

Following an increasing awareness of the importance of enabling non-traditional learners to enter higher education, Bulgaria had to take measures to facilitate the access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It also needed to

* increase public and private investment in higher education;
* access to higher education for those already in the work force for the purpose of continuing professional/personal development;
* university-business partnerships to strengthen the autonomy of universities as well as to improve their governance and accountability.

The country endeavoured to provide greater academic autonomy, to introduce the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) which is a tool that helps to design, describe, and deliver study programmes and award higher education qualifications. Thus the country became joined the process of making higher education comparable across Europe. With the ECTS teaching and learning in higher education in Bulgaria became more transparent and the recognition of all studies was facilitated. It also aided curriculum design and quality assurance and allowed for the transfer of learning experiences between different institutions, greater student mobility and more flexible routes to gain degrees. Using this central tool in the Bologna process Bulgarian universities succeeded in modernizing higher education.

**European Centre for Modern Languages at the Council of Europe**

The ECML is a Council of Europe institution was established in 1997 and is based in Graz, Austria. In cooperation with the Language Policy Unit of the Council the Centre functions as a catalyst for reform in the teaching and learning of languages. Through its 4-year medium-term programmes it aims at promoting excellence in European language education and assists its stakeholders in member states in bringing language education policies and practices together. Since the programmes consist of projects and related activities to which participants from the member states are invited, the ECML provides a platform for gathering and disseminating information, stimulating discussion and training multipliers in matters related to language education. The themes and aims of the ECML programmes are closely related to national and international developments in the area of language policy and practice. The processes and the results are relevant for and adaptable to diverse educational contexts across Europe.

There was evidence of significant gaps between policy and practice, between academic theory and classroom reality and between the needs of practitioners and the support available. This is as true for foreign language learning - despite the wealth of expertise, the years of investment and the priority given to it in most education systems - as it is for the language/s of schooling, for regional/minority languages and for migrant languages in formal, informal and non-formal contexts.

The following graphic shows the top priorities in language education in ECML member states; teacher education lies firmly at the centre and the themes, though distinct, are all interrelated.\*



The added value of the ECML lies clearly in the centre’s ability to support teacher education and to develop networks/communities of educational practice, not only in relation to initial teacher education but also in the context of continued professional development for both newly qualified and experienced teachers.

The 2008-2011 programme “Empowering language professionals” took place against the backdrop of major international developments in the sphere of education. It was based on the increasing demand on the professional skills of teachers who are expected to contribute to national education reform processes. The concrete challenges included standard-linked tuition, result-oriented assessment, greater autonomy of educational institutions and increasing ethnic and cultural heterogeneity among students. That is why it focused on:

* evaluation;
* continuity in language learning;
* content and language education;
* plurilingual education.

The objectives of the programme were:
   - Enhancing the professional competence of language teachers
   - Strengthening professional networks and the wider community of language educators
   - Enabling language professionals to have greater impact on reform processes
   - Contributing to better quality of language education in Europe

The purpose of the scheme was to establish a common institutional basis to standardise and professionalise evaluative methods and facilitate dialogue with relevant partners and stakeholders. The framework was expected to be consistent with internationally accepted evaluation norms, standards and good practices.

The 2012-2015 programme “Learning through languages” ‘builds on the Centre’s previous work and widens its scope to move beyond the foreign language classroom to include all linguistic abilities and the needs of all groups of learners.Within this context language(s) represent(s) the principal medium through which learning is achieved, so the programme will address not just the foreign language classroom but the teaching of the language of schooling, of other languages present in the educational environment and the languages used in subject teaching. So the programme focus involves:

* formal learning;
* informal and non-formal language learning
* mediation- a dialogue with stakeholders involved in the education process.

Given the comprehensive approach of the Centre and the host of activities it offered in order to contribute to the overall development of the European Union, it is worth mentioning the considerable results that were achieved in Bulgaria owing to its endeavours. It facilitated the research on the trends in the policies and practices for multilingualism in Europe, including Bulgaria. The cross-national analysis as well as the regional and national profiles involved Bulgarian experts- teachers, university lecturers and researchers. Thus by participating in projects, seminars, conferences and other events they had the opportunity to gain valuable experience, exchange good practices and enhance cooperation. Also, a great number of Bulgarian teachers could improve their qualification and expertise. They were able to see the benefits of professional networks, continual professional development and lifelong learning. A lot of Bulgarian teachers had the opportunity to improve their skills in regard to digital literacy, foreign languages, teaching content and language integrated learning, etc.

Owing to the ECML policy and the EU strategy in the field of education and science early language learning, the intercultural and plurilingual teaching approaches and the application of the CEFR(Common European Framework of Reference) for languages became a reality.

**EEA and Norway grants**

Through the European Economic Area (EEA) Agreement Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway are partners Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. This initiative represents the contribution of Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway to promoting equality of opportunity and a decent standard of living for all, reducing economic and social disparities, enhancing cooperation and knowledge exchange and to strengthening bilateral relations with 16 EU countries in Central and Southern Europe. Thus, this initiative brings mutual benefits to for institutions and organisations in both the donor and beneficiary countries. The variety of projects supports networking and fosters project partnerships on initiatives of mutual interest. A major emphasis is put on education, research and scholarships.

**Bulgaria: benefits and recommendations**

Bulgaria has already put into effect reforms with reference to:

* the development of lifelong learning;
* the development of qualifications frameworks and validation of non-formal and informal learning;
* pre-primary education;
* primary and secondary education
* the modernisation of higher education and the increase of university autonomy.

However, further efforts are required with regard to skill levels, lifelong learning strategies and the education, research and innovation “knowledge triangle”. The recommendations include:

* reduction of the number of early school leavers;
* increase in the number of young people completing secondary education;
* substantial increase in both private and public investment in human resources as well as in public spending for the sphere of education and science;
* allocation of more resources to training;
* better information about the use of the structural funds should be provided;
* greater role of various sectors of education and training in promoting creativity and innovation.

There are positive results that deserve to be mentioned. Bulgaria has taken the necessary political measures to encourage key educational initiatives such as:

* education, continuous learning and professional development of teachers;
* attainment of excellence in terms of education, research and knowledge transfer in higher education;
* improvement of the attractiveness, quality and relevance of vocational education and training and its integration into the educational system;
* development of partnerships between national institutions and stakeholders;
* increase in transnational mobility schemes.

Having considered the EU strategy, priorities and tools and having analysed Bulgaria’s performance, several conclusions can be made regarding the impact of the implemented measures on the spheres of education, science and research.

The programmes of the EU have contributed to the achievement of various objectives such as:

1. General objectives:
* improvement of the quality of higher education;
* cooperation between European institutions of higher education;
* improve skills and qualifications of citizens through mobility;
1. Specific objectives:
* to develop understanding and appreciation among young people and educational staff of the diversity of European cultures;
* to help young people acquire acquire the basic life-skills and competences necessary for their personal development;
* for future employment and for active European citizenship;
* to reinforce the contribution of higher education and advanced vocational education to the process of innovation;
* promote European cooperation in fields covering two or more sectoral programmes;
* improve quality and innovation;
* contribute to the development of quality lifelong learning and to promote high performance, innovation and the European dimension in systems and practices;
* help promote creativity, competitiveness, employability and the growth of an entrepreneurial spirit;
* stimulate teaching, research and reflection activities in the field of European integration studies;
* support an appropriate range of institutions and associations focusing on issues relating to European integration and on education and training from a European perspective.
1. Operational objectives:
* better mobility;
* better partnerships between schools in different Member States, especially the quality and volume;
* encouragement for learning foreign languages;
* the development of innovative ICT-based content, services, pedagogies and practices;
* better teacher training in terms of quality and the European dimension;
* support in improving pedagogical approaches and school management;
* to improve, strengthen and develop the volume of cooperation (including quality) among higher education institutions and between higher education institutions and enterprises;
* to improve, strengthen and develop innovative practices and their transfer between countries;
* to improve, strengthen and develop innovative ICT-based content, services, pedagogies and practices.
* support policy development and cooperation at European level in lifelong learning in the context of the Lisbon process, the Education and Training 2010 work programme, the Bologna and Copenhagen processes and their successors;

The beneficiaries of the programmes included a really great variety and number of individuals and institutions:

* pupils, students, trainees and adult learners;
* all categories of education personnel;
* people in the labour market;
* institutions and organisations providing learning opportunities within the programmes;
* persons and bodies responsible for systems and policies at local, regional and national level;
* enterprises, social partners and their organisations at all levels, including trade organisations and chambers of commerce and industry;
* bodies providing guidance, counselling and information services;
* participants', parents' and teachers' associations;
* research centres and bodies;
* non-profit organisations, voluntary bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs).
* young researchers, post-doctoral researchers, academics.

The programmes covered all sectors of education and research:

* formal higher education and vocational education and training at tertiary level, including doctoral studies;
* European integration in the academic world;
* pre-school and school education;
* vocational education and training;
* all forms of adult education;

The programmes were implemented through actions such as:

* bilateral and multilateral partnerships;
* Master’s and Doctoral programmes;
* the organisation of events (seminars, colloquia, meetings) to facilitate the implementation of the programme, the information, publication, awareness-raising and dissemination actions, as well as programme monitoring and evaluation;
* multilateral projects focusing on innovation, experimentation and the exchange of good practices;
* unilateral, national or multinational projects, including those that are designed to promote quality in education and training systems through the transnational transfer of innovation;
* mobility of students (studies, training, placements), teaching staff, other staff in higher education institutions and staff of enterprises for the purposes of training or teaching; mobility, such as exchanges of pupils and staff, school mobility, training courses for teachers
* multilateral networks aimed at developing education, disseminating good practice and innovation, supporting partnerships and projects, as well as developing needs analysis.

Education is seen as the key to boosting growth and jobs. Therefore, it is an imperative for the further improvement of governance to use the Community funds and programmes and to develop benchmarks and indicators. Bulgaria has started fostering the continual updating of citizens’ knowledge, skills and competences and has been focused on ensuring social protection, cohesion and inclusion. The collaboration between higher education and industry was strengthened for its importance as a basic requirement for innovation and increased competitiveness was recognised. The strategy programmes as well as the volume of the financial resources allocated to their implementation were the main reasons why it was possible to reach so many individuals and institutions. In the sphere of education and science the awareness of the opportunities for development and improvement and the continuous and comprehensive process of dissemination of good practices and exchange of experience contributed to the increase in the overall number of participants, increase in the number of successful unilateral, national or multinational projects focused on innovation, research and modernization, boosted personal activity and entrepreneurial spirit, strengthened /enhanced cooperation and interest in partnerships. A reference to the available data shows a notably higher percentage of utilization of structural funds.

**Showcase: University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria**

UNWE is the biggest and most highly accredited university in Bulgaria. With the majority of its faculty being focused on research too, it is one of the leading scientific organisations in the country as well. There are several institutes and centres at UNWE specialising in adult education and postgraduate studies. All this variety of educational and scientific activity shows that with a more active participation in international events as well as with greater involvement in bilateral and multilateral cooperation the faculty, administration and students at UNWE will be given the opportunity to reveal their potential to the utmost and thus contribute to the achievement of the EU and every nation’s objective for a knowledge-based society and economy. During the period 2007-2014 the university took advantage of all EU initiatives related to education and science and the results were impressive. The university did not miss the opportunity offered by the EEA grants. Joint Master’s programmes with British universities were started. Several specialties are already taught in English by both Bulgarian and foreign lecturers and it is the university’s aim to be able to provide this for all specialties and, thus, applying the ECTS, to be more competitive.

UNWE participated in over 50 projects financed by the EU under different framework and operational programmes such as:

* Erasmus, Grundtvig, Jean Monnet, Leonardo da Vinci, programmes funded by the European Social Fund, etc.

The projects focused on:

* climate changes, research development and investment, agriculture, rural regions, innovation, sustainable energy development, ecology, European integration, European policy, establishment of a mobility centre for researchers, financial crises and development;
* schoolchildren and students’ practices, doctoral students- fostering innovation, career development of the faculty of the university, higher education reforms and improvement, etc.;
* student, staff and faculty mobility for educational and scientific purposes as well as courses in foreign languages and other key competences for the lecturers;
* enhancing cooperation and various forms of exchange, establishing partnerships and consortia, ECTS.

The stakeholders included the university as an institution, the faculty, administrative staff and students. Their increasing involvement led to raised awareness, higher rates of participation in international research and educational projects, more active exchange of good practices, greater mobility of lecturers and students, intensive international cooperation, more partnerships with the business as well as with educational and research institutions within the European Union and worldwide. The expertise of the university lecturers as well as the competence and experience of the university management were highly appreciated by a large number of partners and, thus, led to a greater interest in cooperating with UNWE on a variety of initiatives. On the other hand, the good dissemination practice of the university was advantageous to a lot of local institutions and individuals and facilitated the further overall process of reforming and improvement in the spheres of knowledge. Now, increasingly more people-students, teachers, lecturers, researchers, administrative staff, etc. are familiar with the opportunities for development offered by the EU membership of Bulgaria and know what the procedures for funding require and how to take advantage of them. They have become more competitive and adaptable and have created an impressive image among their partners- the image of a valuable counterpart.

Taking into consideration the recommendations of the EC, Bulgaria has succeeded in utilizing the structural fund allocated to education and science to a higher degree. It has managed to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the various programmes and thus to progress towards the accomplishment of the main EU objectives within the scope of learning and scientific advance. Now, seven years after our accession to the EU we can conclude that even though there were difficulties at the beginning, Bulgarians were quite successful in this field.

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