

New trends in initial vocational education and training in Bulgaria

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Key words

School vocational training,
vocational qualification,
intensive language learning,
training in entrepreneurship,
decentralisation of
management,
career guidance

SUMMARY

Despite a fall in the percentage of young people choosing this course between 1993 and 1994 (58.17 %) and 2003 and 2004 (55.23 %), vocational training remains the main path chosen by young people in Bulgaria. The national programme for developing pre-school, school education and training (2006-15), adopted in 2006 due to major public interest in this issue, aims to reform initial vocational training. This article presents the main pillars of this reform based on European strategic guidelines. The article points to several challenges to be faced in the near future such as networking vocational schools, developing a national qualifications framework based on the European qualifications framework and developing education and vocational training policies closely linked to employment policies.

In recent years vocational education has been a priority in State policies. This is due mainly to the perceived public need for vocational training for young people in line with the needs of modern society. A popular form of initial vocational training in Bulgaria is training received during secondary education. This allows pupils at the end of their training to obtain a vocational qualification in addition to their certificate of secondary education. In 2003, the percentage of this group within the structure of the national workforce stood at 39.6 %, while the percentage of those who had completed primary or lower-level education was 23.9 %, secondary education 15.63 % and higher education 20.83 % ⁽¹⁾.

The Bulgarian education system has two levels - primary and secondary. Upon commencement of secondary education the choice of the type

⁽¹⁾ Statistical reference book, National Statistical Institute, Sofia, 2004.

of school has always been the centre of attention for Bulgarian families. In the current education structure, it is most common for pupils at the age of 14 or 15 ⁽²⁾, eighth and ninth grades, to make their choice - secondary school or initial vocational education at a vocational school. At this age parents' influence is strong, and they usually define the type of education their children receive. For this reason, after graduating from vocational education young people often do not take up the profession for which they have studied and begin new training.

Vocational education in Bulgaria has become an established trend and is preferred by young people. According to the National Statistical Institute ⁽³⁾, for the 1993/94 school year 58.17 % of the total number of pupils in the secondary stage of their education chose vocational education, while in 2003/04 the percentage was 55.23 %. There is clear evidence of an established trend corresponding to practicality of choice and possibilities for future labour market prospects. Over the past 10 years interest in vocational education has increased due to additional possibilities for intensive learning of a foreign language alongside vocational training.

Notwithstanding all the positive changes seen in recent years, education and, in particular, vocational education are areas in which changes are constantly being made and which have yet to achieve the results expected by society.

Because of very high public interest, in 2006 the national programme for the development of school education and pre-school schooling and training (2006-15) was drafted and passed by the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria. This expressed national consensus on matters of education. The programme also plans for reform of initial vocational education.

What will be the most important changes?

The programme sets out a new educational structure envisaging changes to initial vocational training. It will be introduced during the 2006/7 academic year to fifth grade pupils.

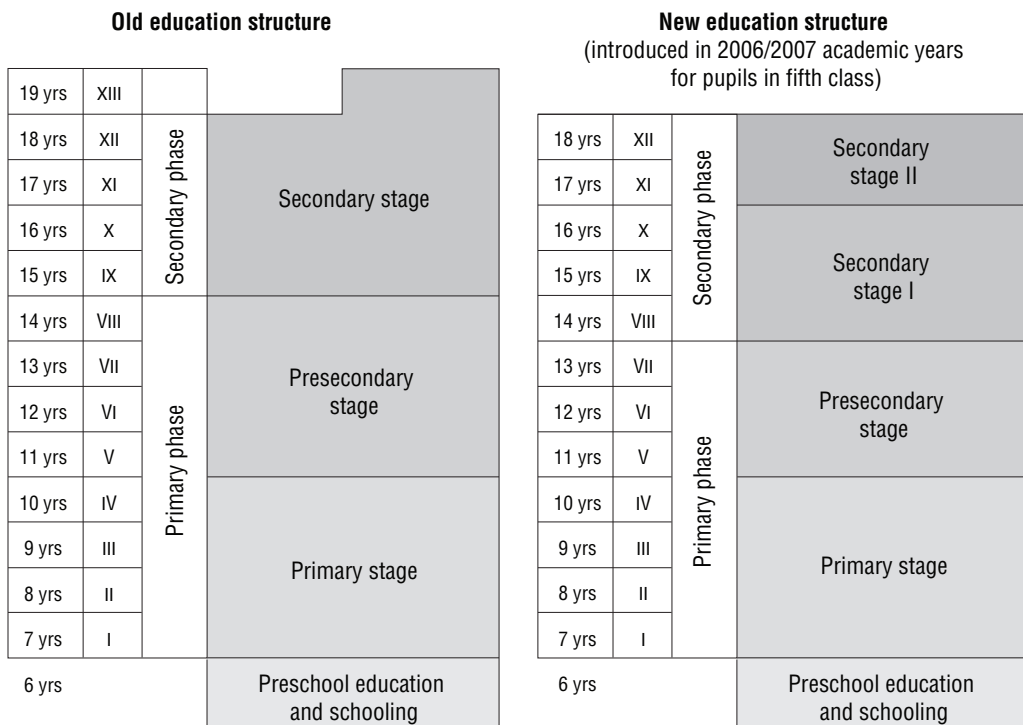
The main changes are as follows:

- (a) primary education will end after successful completion of seventh grade (at the age of 13). Previously it ended on the successful completion of eighth grade (at the age of 14).
- (b) secondary education is divided into two stages - first from eighth to 10th grade (from 14 to 16) and second from 11th to 12th grade (from 17 to 18). Previously, secondary education consisted of only one four-year phase from ninth to 12th grade.

⁽²⁾ In Bulgaria, primary education starts during the year the child reaches the age of seven and enters the first grade.

⁽³⁾ Statistical reference book, National Statistical Institute, Sofia, editions 1995 and 2004. The statistical reference book is published by the National Statistical Institute annually.

Figure 1. Diagram of the education system in Bulgaria



During the first secondary stage (three academic years from 8th to 10th grades) pupils studying at vocational secondary schools will be able to study a chosen profession at the end of which, in addition to a certificate of completing the first stage of secondary education, will receive the first level of their vocational qualification ⁽⁴⁾. This level is slightly higher than the second level of the European qualifications framework (EQF). In the eighth grade of vocational secondary school there will be 15 hours per week of intensive foreign language training, and the remaining hours (32 academic hours per week) will be used for comprehensive education and vocational training. In subsequent grades of the first secondary stage there will also be foreign language training so pupils at vocational secondary schools will be able to acquire one of the basic communicative competences - fluency in a foreign language.

The challenge for initial vocational education during this phase is that very few pupils express a desire to train in professions at the first level of vocational training. This training is not popular in Bulgaria, as shown by information from the National Statistical Institute ⁽⁵⁾. For example, in the 2001/02 academic year only 732 pupils followed the programme, or 0.22 %; in

⁽⁴⁾ The first level of vocational training is the lowest level.

⁽⁵⁾ Statistical reference book, National Statistical Institute, Sofia, 2004.

2001/02, 921 pupils or 0.26 %; in 2003/04, 798 pupils or 0.21 % of the total number of pupils in secondary education. Another challenge is the current list of professions for vocational education and training, in which the lowest number of professions are those with the first level of vocational training. Currently, the list of professions for vocational education and training is being updated and enlarged.

At the beginning of the second stage of secondary education, pupils again have the right to choose their type of education. Those entering vocational secondary school will be able to train in their chosen profession to a second or third level of vocational qualification. Some 20 to 22 hours are set aside for vocational training each week, and the remainder are set aside for studying for school-leaving certificates (10 to 12 hours per week). This level of training lasts two academic years, from 11th to 12th grades. It will begin when pupils are 17 years old, when, to a large extent, they can make their own choice of profession. In comparison, school pupils currently acquire their initial second level of vocational education over a period of four years, from 9th to 12th grades, and third level profession, over a period of five years, from ninth to 13th grades. Pupils currently complete their vocational education at the age of 18 or 19.

What are the expectations from the reform of initial vocational education?

With the introduction of the new education structure, initial vocational training in preferred professions, i.e. those offering a second and third level of vocational training, will begin in 11th grade and will be significantly shorter (2 years) than at present (4 to 5 years). This will lead to an improvement in the adaptability of vocational education to the dynamics of the labour market.

Young people will choose a profession at the age of 16, when they are better able to identify their desires and their independence of choice is greater. This will lead to an increased percentage of pupils entering the profession they have studied for.

It will create new opportunities for pupils completing 10th grade (16 years of age) who prefer not to continue their education ⁽⁶⁾. Opportunities will be provided for them to undertake initial vocational training based on short-term modules; formerly this was not provided for. The short-term modular programmes will be conducted at vocational secondary schools in the framework of a 300 to 360 hour programme. The entire training programme will be conducted over a period of three to four months. These programmes will be for initial vocational training in professions providing the first level of vocational training. Those completing this training will be able to enter the labour

⁽⁶⁾ According to the Constitution of Bulgaria, school education is compulsory up to the age of 16.

market immediately. Short-term modules should be developed with active support from representatives of employers' organisations.

Which traditional elements of vocational education will be preserved?

The opportunity for pupils to acquire a vocational qualification during their secondary education will be preserved. The Bulgarian educational tradition of intensive language study in 8th grade will be preserved since it has achieved very good results. Foreign languages for professional needs in the last academic year of education will also be preserved.

Training in entrepreneurship is another good practice which will be preserved. This was introduced into the vocational education system in the past 10 years or so. The number of vocational secondary schools in which, in addition to the compulsory education in entrepreneurship set out in the curriculum, pupils have had the opportunity in elective or compulsory studies to undergo training in entrepreneurial programmes, has increased. Stimulating entrepreneurial thinking, discovering and analysing economic links and influences, mastering key competences such as teamwork, networking, language, as well as applying foreign-language skills, creates the conditions for graduates from vocational secondary schools to be mobile and flexible in their future employment and professional activities, and provides a basis for lifelong learning. Educational training companies, set up in many vocational secondary schools are models of real companies and help form the key competences for working in a modern work environment. Training provided in an educational training company is also new for teachers. They become consultants and trainers for their pupils.

What other expectations have been created by the programme?

The programme envisages special efforts for career guidance. In recent years, the choice of education in most cases is made without long-term planning and prospects, which leads to more qualified unemployed people with a vocational training certificate who cannot find employment due to the saturation of the labour market. Preferences for a specific type of education among young people depend to a large extent on the information environment, including family and social partners. The Internet and media increase access to important information and consequently to choices which satisfy expectations for quality vocational education. Schools themselves are able to provide public access information about what they can offer, and the results their pupils have achieved on their own web pages.

The national programme for developing school education and pre-school education and training (2006-15) provides for including modules for early career guidance in the pre-secondary phase. The modules will be included in the academic subjects, 'domestic technology and economics' (fifth and sixth grades), and 'technology' (seventh grade).

A further opportunity for career guidance for pupils is planned through career centres, which will be created within the National Pedagogical Centre and its 28 regional structures. These centres will soon be established and equipped, and their personnel trained.

A wealth of information on the opportunities for education and training can be found in the national education portal. This portal (<http://www.e-edu.bg/>) aims to provide access through a modern medium to school education. It will provide a breadth of possibilities to all participants in the education process - pupils, teachers, directors, parents - and allow for one million users to access the site simultaneously. A wide range of users will be able to find electronic training courses, tests (for both external and internal assessment), electronic academic documentation and much information. Users will have access to the electronic websites of all schools in the country as well as registers kept by the Ministry of Education and Science, and they will be able to use a range of information and search systems. The portal is already up and running and is expected to form the basis of a national electronic knowledge network.

Decentralisation of management of the vocational education and training system is an important part of the programme, focused on the principle of subsidiarity: decisions will be taken at the level closest to those who implement it and who are most directly affected. The State will reserve the right to take decisions only in cases where it is not possible or it is not justified for the decision to be taken at another level. Financial decentralisation and decentralisation of authority will continue. But the vision of decentralisation does not stop at the level of municipalities, it continues to individual schools, on the principle that providing rights is connected to greater responsibility. Above all, a reliable system of control and accountability will be created. Flexible control mechanisms are being sought for public control over management of vocational schools. First, the status and role of school governors' boards are being reassessed, aiming to increase their rights (helping to prepare the school budget, commenting on the accounts, as well as participating in the programme for developing the school and in procedures for appointing and dismissing school principals and selecting teaching staff). Each school should not only have a board of governors but also a body with real and effective rights in financial and management activities. Another possibility to control management activities is to create school councils made up of representatives of parents, teachers and the municipality, which could develop as collective school management bodies.

Changes to the status of the principal are being planned. The principal is directly responsible for managing the school and conducting a policy directed at raising the prestige of the school and consolidating it as an insti-

tution providing high-quality, modern education. Currently, principals have permanent tenure of position. Some no longer have the ambition to acquire new management skills and abilities after their appointment. The local community has no leverage to influence such principals. Without doubt, the local community - representatives of parents, teachers and local government - should play a key role in appointing and dismissing school principals. The new procedure should prevent the appointment of anyone inappropriate and provide for better control by the local community over the activities of principals.

The National Training Institute for School Principals was established in 2006 to provide training for principals and increase their organisational, managerial and financial skills. Since the beginning of 2007 it has conducted two sets of training: initial training for candidates wishing to become principals, culminating in a national examination for acquiring a principal's licence; and regular training for active principals, to update their knowledge and increase their level of qualifications. Training includes various courses aimed at turning principals into professionally trained school managers. Training should be given to management teams of vocational schools and information material provided on good practice in school management.

The programme will introduce mandates for appointing principals without restricting the number of mandates. This should allow better control over the activities of principals, who, at given periods, will have to prove the efficiency of their programmes for developing the school, account for what has been achieved and once again ask for the confidence of parents, teachers and pupils. It is planned to develop criteria and indicators for regularly assessing the professional qualities of principals. Compulsory certification would stimulate and discipline principals, especially in combination with the principle of mandates.

At the start of the 2006/07 academic year, a series of one-year pilot projects began in 10 municipalities, in which decisions relating to the appointment and dismissal of principals would be taken by representatives of parents and teachers in the relevant school, the municipality and the regional educational inspectorate. With the projects completed, the results will be analysed and relevant legislative changes will be proposed for a new system of appointing and dismissing principals; it could be introduced as early as 2008/09 into all municipalities, provided all schools receive a delegated budget. A delegated budget is a means of financial decentralisation of the education system which makes schools economically independent. Principals of schools can take independent management decisions when collecting and spending funds. Well-run schools will receive additional financial incentives for effective management and will be able to provide higher salaries for teachers. The delegated budget system will motivate the school's entire staff to economise when spending funds. In vocational secondary schools this will doubtless lead to improving the quality of initial vocational education. The delegated budget system is planned to be introduced in all vocational secondary schools before the end of 2008.

Local authorities will gradually receive authority to specify the number and types of vocational secondary schools. Providing local authorities with the right to open and close vocational secondary schools assumes that these schools will be transferred to municipal financing. Since these are frequently schools of regional importance, this authority should be delegated in conjunction with the relevant bodies at district administration level. Thus, the vocational secondary schools network will be structured according to the specific social and economic characteristics of individual regions. Only a certain number of vocational secondary schools of particular national importance will continue to be State-run. The criteria for defining a State school have yet to be decided on. The Ministry of Education and Science plays the lead role. The new programme overall, and in particular vocational education and training, considers the new requirements of the global economy and the challenges of the highly competitive labour market in the European Union.

What challenges lie ahead?

Vocational education and training faces new challenges. One of the main challenges is optimising the network of vocational schools. Optimisation guarantees adaptation to negative demographic processes and provides vocational education and training according to the needs of the labour market. Experts from the Ministry of Education and Science have analysed the existing network of vocational schools and capacity of the district and regional economy, and planned priorities for the economic development of districts/regions. This analysis is expected to help optimise the network during forthcoming academic years.

The adoption of the national programme for developing school education and pre-school education and training (2006-15) has initiated the process for modernising and improving the legislative system, allowing for comparison of the academic results achieved through the training of pupils and adults in the vocational education and training system with the levels and descriptors of the EQF. Forthcoming changes to the legislative system seek to improve it. The legislative system is to blame for many of the problems facing school education. The school education system continues to be managed by people rather than rules. All basic and long-term social relations will be regulated at legislative level with the aim of guaranteeing greater sustainability in time and transparency in their acceptance.

The national qualifications framework (NQF) is soon to be developed. It will be comparable to the European qualifications framework (EQF). Although the Vocational Education and Training Act defines four levels of vocational qualifications, which to a large extent are equivalent to the first five levels of the EQF, it will be necessary to develop an NQF with all the necessary requirements to provide future adequate comparison with the final EQF.

A study is being carried out on European experience in validating competences obtained in non-formal training and independent education. The question is, which best practices from other countries can be applied in Bulgaria?

A consultation process is being carried out on accumulating and transferring credits in vocational education and training. A study is being made of the institutions of higher education in Bulgaria as well as on best practice in other countries.

Developing vocational education and training is based on European strategic aims for reforming vocational education and training systems: accordance and compliance of development of education and training with employment policies; with research and innovation, macroeconomic, effective partnership at all levels in connection with lifelong learning policy. Reforming the system will reduce the discrepancies between quality in vocational education and the expectations and requirements of consumers, and will widen opportunities for the free movement of people. ■