

PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

The system of higher education in Europe nowadays is faced with a number of challenges regarding standards of accreditation and quality assessment, relations to other organizations and labor market, expectations and demand of learners, university management, etc. The many-year reforms conducted in Bulgaria have led to some characteristics in higher education system and the institutions felled in the trap of changes, thus being in a situation which imposes the need of urgent and adequate actions in term of a purposeful national policy and an effective strategic management at university level. Current paper makes discussions on the most topical problems of Bulgarian universities regarding provision of quality education and competitiveness on international markets. The results presented on the basis of the analyses of the main legislative and strategic documents on national levels are complemented by the data provided by the Bulgarian University Ranking System and the information provided by the National accreditation and evaluation agency. Prospects for future development of the system of higher education in Bulgaria are outlined in the context of the accreditation procedures, quality assurance and ranking systems, academic staff development and links to scientific research, economy and society. The conclusions and recommendations made could be useful as an experience analyzed and a practice presented, as well as a basis for further discussions and research.

Keywords: higher education; quality assurance; accreditation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Increasing global competition led to the adoption of a number of measures at European level aimed at enhancing competitiveness and building a knowledge-based society and economy. In higher education and science this has been expressed in objectives such as achieving compatibility and harmonization of European higher education systems; Increased mobility of students, lecturers and researchers; the creation of a European Higher Education Area and an European Research Area; developing forms of lifelong learning. With the rapid development of science and technology, and particularly of information technology, a global labor market trend has become the growing need for increasingly skilled staff. Over the last decades, there has been a massive increase in higher education, which has led in many countries, including Bulgaria, to a growing number of students. On the one hand, this process has provided wider access to higher education but on the other hand it has given rise to quality assurance challenges. As stated in the national strategy for higher education development, higher education system in Bulgaria faces a double challenge: on the one hand, to accelerate and complete the process of structural reform that has begun, overcoming the lagging behind of the leading European countries; on the other hand, to successfully implement the process of strategic transformation of higher education: from a complementary service sphere to a factor in gaining an advantage in the European and global competition for knowledge, skills, economic and material prosperity and spiritual advancement. The system of higher education in Bulgaria comprises of 51 higher schools (37 state and 14 private). This network significantly exceeds the average performance of a number of comparable countries in the European Union. The expansion of higher education did not have a positive impact on the quality and effectiveness of education. The system is slowly reacting to the dynamically changing demands on the qualifications, motivation and professional careers of academic staff. The educational infrastructure is being developed, reconstructed and modernized with a relatively slow pace. All this hampers the modernization of the higher education system in Bulgaria and the development of the university science in accordance with the global criteria and the European standards. Information on the most important quantitative indicators reveals serious internal imbalances in the system as well as growing inconsistencies with the average level of development achieved for the EU. First, an unsatisfactory share of higher education graduates: a total of 26.9% of the population aged 30 to 34. Second, growing preferences among young people for higher education abroad. This generally positive trend is not the fruit of state efforts and is not subject to a clear strategy to promote international student mobility in both directions: outside and within the country. Adding to the increasing outgoing mobility of Bulgarian students, it is clear that the process of brain drain, of young talents, that experienced Bulgaria in the 1990s, is repeated again. Third, a drastic discrepancy between the profile of highly qualified specialists in the higher education institutions and the real demand on the labor market. Significantly, a large number of graduating students do not take part in the relevant specialty. At the same time, there is a sharp and persistent shortage of personnel in engineering and technical specialties. There are also inadequate measurement of the quality of the graduate and a sustainable system of obtaining an objective feedback from employers on the quality of the knowledge and skills acquired by students during the acquisition of higher education.

The long Bulgarian transition to democracy and market economy has not yet led to the establishment of coherent qualification systems to respond to new economic processes. In the conditions of high unemployment, enterprises are experiencing an increasing shortage of skilled workers, which, along with the aging population and the slow pace of reforms in education, is seen as a major obstacle to economic growth and the attraction of new investments in Bulgaria. The rapid spread of new technologies further increases the gap between demand and supply on the labor market. This also reflects the proposed quality, making the need for reforms in the education and training system even more urgent. At the same time, though slowly, the national economy is beginning to develop to formulate its needs with respect to levels of knowledge and key competencies. From this point of view, the time has come to address the need for new skills through changes in the education and training system to ensure a lifelong learning attitude.

Current paper presents problem areas and key challenges to development of higher education system in Bulgaria and the main challenges considering quality assurance and evaluation in an international environment. Prospects for future development are outlined analyzing the main strategic documents and recommendations are made regarding the management model and principles in future development.

2. PROBLEM AREAS AND KEY CHALLENGES TO DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN BULGARIA

In the analyses presented into the national Strategy for higher education development in the period 2014-2020 the following problems and challenges are identified as presented on Table 1.

Table 1. Problem areas and key challenges to development in higher education system in Bulgaria

N	Problem areas	Challenges to development
1.	Difficult access to higher education (HE) for some social groups and low share of tertiary education among people of working age	Main challenges related to access to and the increase in the number of tertiary education graduates: Reducing the number of prospective students due to demographic problems. The presence of social problems that do not allow some groups to continue their education but require starting job immediately after graduation. Lack of effective connectivity between higher education development and changing individual needs – higher education institutions (HEIs) do not provide opportunities to combine learning with work or family commitments. Despite the wide network of HEIs, there are whole areas where there is no university, and social opportunities do not allow easy access to higher education in the capital and large towns.
2.	Difficulties connected to the quality and compatibility of higher education with European higher education systems	Main challenges related to the quality and compatibility of Bulgarian higher education: Lagging of teaching methods, demotivation of young teachers and researchers, aging of the academic staff. Low motivation of students for science and research careers, as well as for acquiring fundamental knowledge (especially in the natural sciences) and their application into the practice. Outdated study programs. Low level of scientific results in some HEIs. Existence of inappropriate specialties in some HEIs with the goal to attract more students. Weaknesses in the implementation of internal quality management systems. Complicated and ineffective accreditation procedures and subjective criteria. Insufficient outgoing and ingoing mobility of students and lecturers and formal implementation of the system of accumulation and transfer of credits in education.
3.	Lack of a connection between higher education and the needs of business and public institutions	Key challenges concerning the relationship between higher education and the needs of the labor market: Difference between the competencies of graduates and labor market needs. Shortage of staff in the field of engineering, natural, pedagogical and other spheres. Lack of connection between the content of the training (curricula and programs), the labor market and practice. Need for practical training of students in a real working environment. Insufficient career guidance for graduate students.
4.	Insufficient link between training and research	Key challenges related to the link between training and research: Insufficient funding for fundamental and applied research and experimental development. Outdated and insufficient scientific infrastructure. Resources for science are allocated to all HEIs regardless of scientific results. Insufficient number of publications in scientific journals included in the world system of indexing and evaluation. Insufficient participation of students, PhD students and post-graduate students in research. Insufficient commercialization of scientific results. Difficulties with the project activity - co-financing, information provision, complicated rules for accountability. Insufficient research mobility.
5.	Improving the management system of higher education institutions and network. Introducing clarity in HEIs and education-qualification degrees	Main challenges related to the management system of higher education institutions, the HEIs network, the HEI types and the educational and qualification degrees: Need for greater involvement of business representatives, public institutions and students in the university management. Need autonomy to be coupled with mechanisms of institutional accountability - transparency, public control. Need to optimize the network of higher education institutions. Need to clarify the status of different types of HEIs. Unclear place of the "professional bachelor" degree in the three-stage cycle. Overcoming duplication and fragmentation of professional fields between higher education institutions.
6.	Disadvantages of the current financing model	Main challenges related to the current financing model: Insufficient efficiency and transparency of the use of financial resources. Insufficient funding for the higher education system.

N	Problem areas	Challenges to development
		Lack of incentives to improve quality and to achieve high results, as well as to develop strategic professional fields and specialties for the country. Lack of sufficient incentives for students to achieve higher achievements.
7.	Problems related to the attractiveness and career advancement of academic staff	Main challenges related to the attractiveness and career advancement of academic staff: Imperfections in national legislation. Lack of differentiation in payment according to results. Need to provide opportunities for training.
8.	Insufficient opportunities for lifelong learning	Key challenges related to providing more and more diverse lifelong learning opportunities in HE: Not enough opportunities and diverse forms of lifelong learning are available. There are no links between HEIs and business for the needs of the labor market and the content of the training. Poor development of electronic forms for distance learning.
9.	Changes in the higher education system	Adoption and implementation of the National qualification framework in accordance to the European qualification framework. Assurance of the academic autonomy. Academic staff development. Accreditation and evaluation procedures. Ranking system and registries elaboration and development. Regulation and financing of scientific research in HEIs. Training of students, incl. practical training.
10.	Risks and barriers to strategic reforms	Demographic crisis Disproportions in the labor market Labor devaluation and chronic financial deficits

One of the most important challenges for higher education in Bulgaria is maintaining and improving quality along with the under-financing of the HE system and the problems arising from its mass expansion. Although in recent years all higher education institutions in Bulgaria have adopted their own internal quality management systems, the control over their implementation and the exchange of good practices are rather unsatisfactory. The procedures of the National evaluation and accreditation agency (NEAA) for evaluation and accreditation of higher education institutions are complicated. A large part of HEIs is constantly under accreditation. This artificially complicates the process, overloads human resources, creates additional bureaucracy, and ultimately hinders the normal work of higher education institutions. At the same time, some of the accreditation criteria are subjective and do not allow for effective evaluation. At the same time, the current regulatory framework creates a monopoly situation for NEAA, and the recognition of accreditation by foreign agencies is virtually impossible.

A major weakness of the HE system is that there has not been an effective mechanism for linking higher education institutions as a place for training and a source for recruiting qualified professionals on the one hand, and business and public institutions as consumers of highly educated proactive and motivated staff, adaptable to structural and qualification changes in the employment system, on the other. There is a serious discrepancy between the structure and profile of graduating students and the dynamics of the labor market in Bulgaria and the EU. The urgent nature of the reforms in this direction is also reinforced by the internal disproportions in the national and regional labor markets in Bulgaria. The main problems to be solved are: serious / growing shortage of staff in the field of engineering, natural and pedagogical sciences; lack of training in new jobs needed for the green economy, high-tech and innovative activities; technological lag in service and manufacturing, with a large majority of SMEs working mainly as subcontractors of large European and transnational companies (the predominant demand for staff is for low-skilled and routine activities); mismatch between the expected competencies and the realities in practice. Urgent solutions are also require the practical training of students in a real work environment. Young professionals lack both adequate practical knowledge and skills and habits. Along with the needs of businesses, the role of the public and the public sector is important in defining HE policies and the need for staff. In addition to business (the business sector), there are many users of the sectors related to intangible goods - state and municipal institutions and the non-governmental sector in the areas of government, regional development, judiciary, medicine, education, health, security, sports, culture, etc. The Strategy for higher education development 2014-2020 presents the following SWOT analysis of the state of the higher education system in Bulgaria (Table 2).

Table 2. SWOT analysis of the state of the higher education system in Bulgaria

Strengths:	Weaknesses:
<p>Introduced the degree system: Bachelor - Master - Doctor (Bologna Process). Established ECTS System. Introduced Internal Quality Assessment and Quality Assurance Systems. Introduced and maintained by Ministry of Education and Science Information system, which includes the Register of Higher Education Institutions, the Register of the Academic Staff of Higher Education Institutions, the Register of active and suspended Students and PhD Students, the Register of Graduate Students and PhD Students, the Register of Banks Granting Loans under the Law for Students and PhD Students Lending. Developed and functioning Rating System of Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Bulgaria. Established National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) as an independent agency to the Council of Ministers. Accepted National Qualifications Framework. Accepted National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. Adopted National Strategy for the Development of Scientific Research. Adopted Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. Provision of a national license to access scientific databases of reputable publishers and information platforms. Joint programs with leading European universities. Establishment of centers in HEIs for continuous, continuing or postgraduate training and career development. Stimulation of students' achievements through scholarships. Established and functioning system for offering practical training in a real working environment.</p>	<p>Fragmentation of the system, lack of a comprehensive vision (strategy) for HE development. Lack of a balance between the autonomy of universities and the degree of control exercised by the state. Lack of legal prerequisites for effective control and sanctions in case of inefficient management and unlawful activity of HEIs. Lack of matching of the proposed education and the needs of the labor market; student intake planning is not in line with the needs of the economy. Complicated accreditation procedures and subjective criteria, failure to link funding to accreditation and ratings and lack of incentives to improve quality. Outdated legislation. Problems in the application of the legislation for academic staff development, difficulties in attracting academic staff and stimulating its development. Aging academic staff; weak motivation and inadequate social status of the academic staff; lack of interest in academic careers. Lack of diverse sources of funding for higher education; ineffective system for financing and distribution of the state subsidy. Funding of research is not dependent on results, insufficient links between higher education and science, low student involvement in research, lack of innovation. Insufficient opportunities for lifelong learning. Insufficient internal and external academic mobility. Problems related to the issuance of the European Diploma Supplement and the formal implementation of the ECTS system.</p>
Opportunities:	Threats:
<p>Modernizing and harmonizing the regulatory framework. Strengthening the role of the "knowledge triangle" in higher education institutions and their recognition as scientific research centers. Establishing higher education institutions as centers of lifelong learning. Strengthening partnerships with business and commercializing research results. Strengthening the practical direction of training in higher education institutions; employability - providing modern knowledge, skills and competencies. Updating curricula and programs; introduction of new teaching methods. Optimizing accreditation procedures. Creating conditions and a system for motivating and enhancing the qualification of the academic staff. Enhancing mobility of students and academic staff. Ensuring a real autonomy and responsibility of higher education institutions - create mechanisms for effective control and self-regulation. Improving the efficiency of higher education management. Introducing a new model for funding higher education and research-driven results.</p>	<p>The demographic crisis and the reduced number of candidate students. Disproportions in the labor market. Chronic underfinancing of higher education and science. Reducing interest in Bulgarian higher education. Lack of sufficiently qualified staff in priority areas. Shortage of academic staff, young people's lack of interest in academic careers.</p>

Over the past decade efforts have been made to modernize the Bulgarian higher education management system in line with the European models and recommendations of the European Commission. The changes that have been made in the legislative, and partly in the institutional practice, have led to positive results which can be further improved within the framework of academic autonomy. Autonomy needs to be coupled with mechanisms of institutional accountability - transparency, public control, academic competition. The aim

should be to achieve a higher education system that is capable of self-regulation according to the dynamics of social processes and to maintain the quality of higher education, i.e. a system capable of sustainable development. It is important to choose an effective option for monitoring and control by the state and society in enhanced autonomy and self-control in the management of higher education institutions, to find the most accurate formula for change that combines national traditions with international trends and successful practices. An important task is to optimize the network of higher education institutions - not through administrative pressure, but through well thought-out financial mechanisms and by transferring good European practices to promote the integration and unification of higher education institutions on a regional and a professional basis. The initiatives and measures were implemented at intervals without the necessary synergy between them and without sufficient coordination between the institutions responsible for implementing the changes. This has led to the fragmentation of higher education development policies, demotivation and, in some cases, even resistance to part of the academic staff and student dissatisfaction.

3. CHALLENGES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EVALUATION

Quality assurance in higher education is one of the most discussed issues related to the development of the educational system and higher education institutions in Bulgaria, as well as the need for qualified staff for the development of the economy. Unfortunately, however, it is very often understood differently and finds different interpretations (Arabska, 2012). Some regulatory positions make this possible, especially when it comes to determining who is the subject and user of that quality - students, teachers, the state, the business, or society as a whole. There is still a lack of personal motivation and conviction in the importance of building quality assurance and maintenance systems, and hence a clear vision of the required activities. Recently, higher education institutions have come to realize that it is precisely through the quality of the service they offer that they can survive in the conditions of increased competition on the education market where more and more educational institutions are entering abroad.

In order for such a system to function effectively, regulatory, institutional, market and financial mechanisms are needed to ensure and maintain the quality of higher education. The idea of "high" quality is enshrined in the first articles of the Higher Education Act (HEA). The inclusion in the activities of higher education institutions not only of purely educational activities but their combination with research, innovation, artistic, sports and health activities implies the construction of a wider quality system covering all points and interactions in the vertical and horizontal of the structure of higher education institutions. In Art. 6 para. 3 of the Higher Education Act (HEA), the importance of the academic staff is emphasized, and para. 4 states that ensuring the quality of education and research is done through an "internal system for assessing and maintaining the quality of education and academic staff, which also includes studying students opinion at least once per academic year." The latter, however, although perhaps for the sake of greater clarity and emphasis of importance, quite vaguely determines the place of students by studying the student's opinion in the overall quality system. According to the law, the system has yet to "control, maintain and manage" the quality of education and academic staff, and it is governed by the regulations of the higher schools. Here also arises the question of the extent to which the state has to interfere and control the processes of quality assurance in higher education institutions. The HEA says that besides forming a national policy and guaranteeing academic autonomy, the state "takes care of the quality of the training of specialists and research" but it needs to be further clarified how and whether the current intervention does not actually affect negatively the achievement of this which is the goal of achieving quality. The state authority for the implementation of the national policy in higher education is the Minister of education, youth and science, the control of which has the character of the quality control. A specialized state body for evaluation, accreditation and quality control of the activities of higher education institutions is the National evaluation and accreditation agency (NEAA) at the Council of Ministers. According to Art. 75, para. 1 and 2 of the Higher Education Act: accreditation is recognition by the National evaluation and accreditation agency of the right of higher education institutions to award higher education degrees in certain fields, professional fields and specialties of the regulated professions by assessing the quality of the activities of the higher schools. Evaluation and accreditation are aimed at stimulating higher education institutions to develop their potential and to enhance and maintain the quality of the education offered. In this regard, NEAA approves criteria for evaluation and accreditation. NEAA implements the activities of institutional and program accreditation and evaluation of projects for opening and transformation. It also performs post-accreditation monitoring and control over: the ability of the institution and its core units and affiliates to provide high quality education and research through an internal quality assessment and quality assurance system; the implementation of the recommendations given in the evaluation and accreditation; the capacity of the higher education institution, the capacity of the professional fields and the specialties of the regulated professions. Thus, in practice, the most important

activity of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency is to assess the activity and quality of the higher education.

The principle of academic autonomy enshrined in the Higher Education Act presupposes that the higher education institutions themselves carry out, i.e. develop mechanisms for quality assurance, control and maintenance. The requirements laid down in the HEA with regard to the structure of state higher education also imply the establishment of quality structures. Private higher education institutions may have another structure, way of management and appointment of the governing bodies, provided that this does not violate academic freedoms. This means that the law also considers that the individual units in the structure with specific names and organization are not at the first place, but the processes and interactions in the organization. So that the state schools have clear conditions for the organizational structure in relation to quality assurance due to the strong intervention of the state in their activities. Private higher schools are given the opportunity to judge by their very nature what is best for them, especially regarding the quality of education, because this is the main factor determining their competitiveness in the education services market. The establishment of a framework in the law regarding the structure and organization of the educational process in higher education institutions is also part of this system, as well as the evaluation and attestation of the members of the academic staff. Thus, the accreditation of the higher education institutions has two main tasks: control to ensure the minimum quality requirements and periodic evaluation to support the processes of quality maintenance and improvement. The former serves as a "filter mechanism" and the second leads to analyses and recommendations, including specific strategies to ensure and maintain quality. Assessment has two dimensions: internal (self-assessment) and external (performed by external independent experts). The recommendations actually reflect the main purpose of accreditation, which is to support further improvement (Arabska, 2012).

The updating of curricula and programs in higher education institutions is one of the main challenges in their functioning in the contemporary conditions of a highly competitive environment, influencing all the processes and activities carried out in them, and itself strongly influenced by the general regulatory requirements and strategic guidelines at European and national level. Part of the overall quality assurance, maintenance and improvement system covered by the different quality definitions and perspectives in higher education, the process of updating curricula includes involving all stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in the learning process (students, lecturers, management, state, business, society). It is no coincidence that this question is set in line with "labor market requirements", namely: acquiring knowledge, skills and competencies. On the other hand, curriculum updating is also a major problem, involving much of the time and resources of higher education institutions (Terziev & Arabska, 2015c).

The updating of higher education curricula and programs in relation to labor market needs is part of the activities to improve the quality of education and training and to achieve the objectives of building a knowledge-based economy. What is crucial for each higher education institution is the proper understanding and implementation of the European credit transfer system and its instruments for the mutual recognition of qualifications and competences and the promotion of students' mobility. The application of flexible forms of training (e-learning, distance learning, workplace training, etc.) in line with the needs of learners is a serious challenge to the developing education system, which can be addressed by applying curriculum approaches and student-centered programs based on the acquisition of relevant competencies described as learning outcomes. Achieving success in providing quality of training, however, also requires developing the relevant regulatory framework and procedures for recognizing and validating knowledge and skills, through informal learning and self-learning. An important milestone is the creation of an effective system of feedback and monitoring of the transition from learning to work and feedback on the suitability of training graduates for employment, i.e. employability.

Internationally the accreditation of higher education institutions is an official and transparent process based on internationally accepted standards for establishing whether organizations and/or programs meet the minimum quality requirements. At the same time, accreditation increases the transparency of the complex market of national and international training providers. The effects of accreditation are officially recognized by the educational institution in higher education giving an academic degree to graduate students equivalent to other similar educational institutions (whether state or private) and ensuring equal rights of students and academic staff. There is, of course, always a risk of objectivity of evaluations, but the pursuit and changes in procedures are the improvement in this respect as well as the giving of objective recommendations for development which is the most valuable in such an assessment because the necessary guidance is given, i.e. a feedback and correction system works. The compulsion of higher education institutions to comply with accreditation requirements leads to a misunderstanding and application of the overall quality approach,

which ultimately affects the results and leads to a lack of motivation, which means that the implementation of an obligation cannot be with the necessary efficiency and effectiveness (Terziev & Arabska, 2015b).

The main objective of the ESG Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance is to contribute to a common cross-border and all-stakeholders understanding of quality assurance in education and teaching, playing an important role in the development of national and institutional quality assurance systems in the European higher education area and cross-border cooperation. The main purpose of this "external quality assurance" is to increase transparency, mutual trust and recognition. At the heart of all quality assurance activities are both related report and support objectives that create confidence in the effectiveness of the higher school. Quality assurance standards are divided into three parts: internal quality assurance; external quality assurance; Quality Assurance Agencies. The three parts are inextricably linked and together form the basis of a European quality assurance framework. ESGs are based on the following four quality assurance principles in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA): higher education institutions have the primary responsibility for the quality of their services and their provision; quality assurance meets the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programs and students; quality assurance supports the development of quality culture; quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society. A successfully implemented quality assurance system will provide information to assure the higher education institution and the public in the quality of the activity of the higher education institution (accountability), as well as provide advice and recommendations on how it can improve the activity. It is important to develop a culture of quality that is accepted by all: from students and academics to the management of the institution and managers.

NEAA's activities, in particular the development of evaluation and accreditation criteria, are aimed at ensuring accountability and transparency of activities in higher education institutions and research. The development of systems of criteria and procedures aims to achieve objectivity in the evaluation and accreditation and enhance the quality of higher education. Demand for the best methods and approaches to quality assurance in the higher education system is conditioned by the contemporary processes of globalization and the need to increase the competitiveness of higher education institutions by ensuring and maintaining quality in all spheres of activity. In order to work effectively the common system in its three parts, it is necessary: for the internal quality assurance - to review the internal quality systems in the higher schools, to achieve realism in the reports prepared by the HEIs in relation to the procedures carried out by NEAA; for external evaluation and quality assurance agencies - inclusion of business experts in the procedures and introduction of an electronic evaluation and accreditation system. The latter will provide an opportunity for technical provision and facilitation of procedures, information, communication and coordination between institutions in the higher education system (Terziev & Arabska, 2015b).

The transition to ESG 2015 in Bulgaria which started at the end of 2016 is a huge challenge not only for institutions in the higher education system but also for quality assurance agencies. Putting new accents in the work with stakeholders and the public brings to the fore the problems that need to be addressed as quickly as possible and which imply a radical change in traditional systems and approaches. The basic requirements for quality policies and quality systems in higher education lead not only to changes in the internal regulations of higher education institutions, but also to the search for ways for their effective implementation. ESG 2015 establishes a common framework and provides the necessary basis for the various institutions, but they should be convinced that its proper understanding and implementation will lead to an improvement in the quality and enhancement of the institution's international competitiveness rather than just the preparation of documentation to pass accreditation and evaluation procedures, the passage of which is unavoidable and usually accepted as additional burden and commitment of resources (Arabska, 2017).

The ranking system of the higher education institutions in Bulgaria assists the users in choosing a higher education institution. The updated edition of the system for 2016 contains information on 51 accredited higher education institutions in Bulgaria, offering training in specialties, distributed in 52 professional fields. In view of the individual interests of the users, the system makes it possible to make various types of higher education rankings in each of the existing professional fields. The ranking system collects data on over 100 indicators that measure different aspects of higher education activities, including the learning process, the learning environment, social and administrative services, scientific work, prestige, and the realization of graduates in the labor and regional significance. These indicators are based on statistical data collected from various sources, incl. sociological surveys. Indicators are divided into six groups: educational process; research; learning environment; social and administrative services; prestige; realization on the labor market and regional significance.

The Ranking system of higher schools in the Republic of Bulgaria is another attempt to assess the quality but still with a number of shortcomings in the applied methodology and the indicators used. The rating system for higher schools uses statistics from national and international registers as well as those collected through a survey of students' opinion, representative in professional fields. The data are valid for a specific period, and changes that have occurred after this period are not reflected in the system. One of the limiting factors is the use of data from different databases, and one of the main drawbacks is the use of data provided by the universities themselves subject to evaluation that are difficult to verify. Using data on the average success of the secondary education diploma, the insured income of graduates, contributions to the social security system, and prestige among students, in many cases, gives rise to unrealistic assessments and erroneous rankings. In cases where the data collected for a given higher education institution in a professional field is not sufficient to allow its classification, the relevant higher education institution in the relevant professional field is drawn "under the line". This means that data on individual indicators for such schools is available to users, but these schools are not included in the ranking for the relevant professional field. In the very description of the limitations of using the rating system data, it is stated that the rating of the higher schools should be used carefully. The order of the higher schools in the professional rankings and the points obtained by them should not be absolutized. If a higher school has received more points in the final ranking than another does not yet mean that it is the best for the particular user. Therefore, it is recommended that the current rating system to be used only as a start in a longer comprehensive and detailed study of the training opportunities offered by Bulgarian higher education institutions. However, the major contradiction remains, as it is first defined as to assist users of educational services in the choice of a higher education institution and then it is explained that higher schools' rankings in professional fields within the rating system do not constitute a recommendation to choose a particular higher education institution because no expert system can replace the autonomous choice, it can only help it to make this choice more informed. But this is unlikely to be possible without further refinement.

4. PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN BULGARIA

The desirable direction formulated in the National strategy for the development of higher education is the transformation of Bulgaria into a strong and attractive regional center for modern higher education with European profile, attractive for students from Europe and the world. The guiding principles in the preparation and implementation of the strategy are: preservation of the national tradition; inclusion; performance and sustainability; growth based on continuity and development capability; transparency and fairness; openness of the system to the socio-economic environment. The long-term strategic goal is to create a modern, effective and constantly evolving system of higher education, at the center of which is the person with its personal qualities and intellectual potential, and which provides quality, accessible, science-based and market-oriented higher education. Specific objectives are the following: improving access and increasing the share of graduates; significantly improving the quality of higher education and its compatibility with European HE systems in order to occupy a worthy place in EHEA; establishing a sustainable and effective relationship between HEIs and the labor market and achieving a dynamic match between demand and supply of higher education specialists; stimulating research at HEIs and the development of innovations oriented towards the market economy; modernization of the management system of the higher education institutions and the clear definition of the types of HEIs and the educational qualification degrees; increasing funding for higher education and science and the efficiency through an improved model of funding; overcoming the negative trends in the career development of HEIs and stimulating activities; expanding and strengthening the lifelong learning network; wide application of various electronic forms for distance learning.

To the future development a great influence will be rendered by the processes of lifelong learning. National strategy for lifelong learning 2014-2020 sets out the strategic framework of the state policy in education and training during the next program period according to the global goals put on the European level for smart, inclusive and sustainable growth as a response to all emerging challenges in regards to the social inclusion and economic growth. It accepts the definition of lifelong learning, as used in the EC Memorandum on lifelong learning (2000): all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, and covers all forms of education, training and learning outlining content, forms, environment and interactions among all the parties: learners; training providers; employers, trade organizations, labor unions, civil society organizations; regions, municipalities and local communities; governmental bodies as ministries and agencies, etc. according to the new scope of learning in conditions of quality assurance, transparency and comparability (Table 3).

Table 3. Principles in the implementation of the National strategy for lifelong learning 2014-2020

Principle	Short description
Quality	transforming lifelong learning into a factor for the success and competitiveness of the citizenry, the institutions, and organizations by providing the conditions to achieve higher educational objectives
Equality and diversity	ensuring equal opportunities for all individual and collective stakeholders to exercise their rights and duties arising from their participation in various and multiple forms of lifelong learning, which take place in diverse socio-economic contexts
Decentralization	transfer of powers and resources from central government bodies and public institutions to the regional administrations, the municipalities, the setups of social partners, the non-governmental organizations, etc., and also to associations of training providers in order to ensure the access to lifelong learning activities for various target groups and specific participants
Cooperation	conduct of consultation processes at various levels, proactive dialogue and allocation of the rights, duties, and risks among all stakeholders in order to achieve the strategic objectives and priorities of the lifelong learning policy through implementation of the specific measures scheduled for the impact areas
Measurability	enhancement of the opportunities for monitoring and measuring the education objectives
Flexibility	preparedness of the stakeholders to respond, upon occurrence/ascertainment of unforeseen social and socio-economic processes, through expansion of the earmarked objectives and actions.

Strategic priorities are set as follows: a step forward to a new educational approach and innovations in education and training; increasing the quality of education and training; ensuring the educational environment for equal access to lifelong learning and for active social inclusion and active citizen participation; promoting education and training aligned to the needs of the economy and changes on the labor market. Impact areas in the National strategy for lifelong learning are: ensuring the conditions for transition to a functioning system for lifelong learning; ensuring the conditions for expanding the scope and enhancing the quality of preschool education and training; applying a comprehensive approach to enhancing the educational achievements and reducing the share of early school leavers; enhancing the quality of school education and training towards attainment of the key competences, improving the learners' achievements and personality development; increasing the attractiveness and improving the quality of vocational education and training to ensure employment and competitiveness; modernizing the higher education; development of opportunities for non-formal and informal learning for personal and professional progress. New opportunities for good quality of life following the working career's end; coordinating the interaction among stakeholders in the implementation of the lifelong learning policy.

Lifelong learning is in the basis of the reforms on different levels because of its significance for assurance of quality of life and social security, the links to globalization and technological changes and economic opportunities (Terziev and Arabska, 2015a). Establishing the right educational policies based on preliminary needs' analyses and providing equal opportunities is part of effective strategies of overcoming unemployment and contributing to social cohesion and stability. The harmonization of European, national and local strategies is necessary for provision of efficiency, assurance of funding and resources and long-term effects.

There is a need of measuring whether current education and qualification system answers the needs of individuals and organizations, as well as how to apply best lifelong learning in order to assure improvements in qualifications and recognition. The outcomes should be measured as quality skills giving competitive advantages to learners and making them adaptable and mobile. However, all the interventions should be carefully analyzed before entering into force according to specific characteristics of some regions and their population in connection to the existing culture and understandings. The introduction of the culture of lifelong learning would not be an easy and fast process. Significant efforts in motivation activities should be put and it should embrace all the parties: state through regulatory requirements, policies, strategies and specific support; business – actively participating, determining needs and providing support; educational and training institutions – building capacities and assuring inclusion; potential learners – willing to change (Terziev and Arabska, 2015a).

Lifelong learning encouragement prerequisites could be formulated as follows (Terziev & Arabska, 2015a): recognition of non-formal and informal learning; encouragement of vocational training; development of trainers' skills; creating culture of learning through increased learning opportunities, improving access and participation, stimulating learning demand; inclusion of a broader scope of learners in respect to age, occupation, educational and professional background, etc.; partnership approach – collaboration of all

stakeholders in planning, implementation, funding, resources allocation, etc.; communication and coordination; developing mechanisms for quality assurance, evaluation and monitoring; continuous improvement and renewal of policies and system.

5. CONCLUSION

Modern challenges to the development of the higher education system are linked to quality assurance in relation to the change of the paradigm towards "student-centered learning and teaching"; focus on learning outcomes and competency-based learning, incl. validation of knowledge and skills, recognition of qualifications, etc. Higher education institutions operate in an environment of increasing internationalization, rapid development of information and communication technologies and new forms of delivery of education. Quality assurance in higher education is one of the most discussed issues related to the development of the educational system and higher education institutions in Bulgaria, as well as the need for qualified staff for the development of the economy. Unfortunately, there is still a lack of personal motivation and conviction in the importance of building quality assurance and maintenance systems, and hence a clear vision of the required activities. On the other hand, it is precisely through the quality of the service they offer that higher education institutions in Bulgaria could survive in the conditions of increased competition on the educational market, where more and more educational institutions are entering abroad. Ensuring the quality of training and research is a top priority because it is in close association with all sectors and general development, namely: a comprehensible and comparable system of higher education; adopting a system involving two main cycles; introducing a system of educational credits; enhancing mobility; enhancing cooperation in the field of quality assessment; strengthening the European dimension in higher education. Reforms are thus geared to the structure of higher education systems; common principles of quality assurance; recognition of qualifications and periods of study; increasing mobility and overcoming obstacles to free movement, which are generally all aspects of training as an object of quality and quality as a product of learning. In terms of quality of education, the link with the labor market, the modernization of higher education, the promotion of mobility and entrepreneurship is very important. Trends and processes tend to increasingly focus on learning rather than learning material and training based on competence acquisition. Traditional teaching methods and models are shifting, posing new challenges to academic staff development and more effective inclusion of learners in all higher education activities. Among the main issues and challenges related to quality assurance in higher education are: new curricula and programs for employability, an effective science-business relationship, knowledge transfer, new goals and dimensions of mobility for learning or internship between individual higher education institutions and countries, improving management systems in higher education institutions, opening up lifelong learning and building systems to validate knowledge and skills acquired through informal and non-formal learning, encouraging entrepreneurial activity among students. Next reforms should be focused on a more effective management model based on accountability, control and transparency.

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