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# A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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## **1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN BULGARIA**

By Dr. Anca Dumitrescu (University of Bucharest)

### **1.1 Introduction**

Bulgaria has developed a national policy for lifelong learning which is now in the process of being implemented. This chapter intends to present issues surrounding Bulgaria's approach to the validation of non-formal and informal learning, which is linked to those further developments on lifelong learning policies.

Bulgaria's long tradition of adult education mirrors that of its neighbours (such as Romania) and of other countries in the Balkan region and Western Europe. The 126-year history of the development of vocational education represents proof of the enduring and ever increasing demand for lifelong learning. In 1878 the first written legislative articles were in place to regulate education in the Principality of Bulgaria. Marin Drinov contributed much to the enlightenment of the Bulgarian population. Evening and Sunday schools for education and further education were opened for many Bulgarians who had only continued in formal education up to the end of primary school and for older adults without any formal education. The education law for trade and industry, which was enacted in 1924, divided all the country's vocational schools into secondary, practical and additional schools. The purpose of the latter group was to raise the education and qualification levels amongst employees in specific vocational sectors, who had not finished vocational or grammar schools.

The vocational education offered was linked to evening and Sunday courses run for a wide variety of learners, where lectures in the fields of agriculture, trade, craft and so on were held in order to improve general and specialised knowledge. "*Tschitalishta*" (meaning "*reading rooms*"), represent the traditional form of educational establishment in Bulgaria, which provide libraries and offer adult education in local settings across the country.

Education during the period 1944-1989 was characterised by its highly ideological orientation, central administration and weakness of education structures brought about by many reforms. This had an impact on the system for adult education, which was part of the mainstream educational system, as well as different education and qualification courses, which were not part of the educational system. In addition, there was a multiplicity of informal institutions that offered education in the form of courses, rounds and correspondence. The subject matter mainly centred on the improvement of the knowledge and proficiencies of workers in specific fields of work. Further education, as well as re-education was usually organised by factories according to changes in their workforce requirements necessitated by the economy. The Ministry of Education was responsible for overseeing further education and re-education. The Ministry of Labour, its branch ministries, and authorities were responsible for their organisation.

Since 1989 the education system in Bulgaria has undergone a process of reform aimed at achieving coherence with other educational systems, especially those in the EU countries. The Bulgarian authorities have made, and must continue to make, considerable efforts to guarantee sustainable development of the education system with a view to providing valuable and competitive knowledge and skills to its population.

Within the context of post-1989 Bulgaria, numerous transformations and the new challenges posed by the EU accession criteria, the lifelong learning agenda (LLL) has developed slowly. The new legislative framework for adult training progressively emerged, dealing with: (1) labour market training for the unemployed; (2) continuing adult education as part of the formal education system, mainly in the form of involving schools in providing training for the unemployed; (3) promoting a more comprehensive approach to non-formal learning and tackling the quality issues and recognition of prior learning. This includes steps towards setting up national qualification frameworks.

## **1.2 Existing Initiatives**

The national policy on continuing education and training for adults aims at facilitating access to science and culture for all citizens, regardless of age, in order to enable them to adapt to the major changes occurring in the democratic society. Within the education system, lifelong learning (LLL) is regulated by the 1991 Law on National Education, in Article 4.1.: “Citizens shall be given the right to education. They can enhance continuously their education and qualification”.

The Employment Promotion Act of 2002 addressed explicitly “lifelong education programs and measures” providing for vocational education and training of the employed and the unemployed.

In Bulgaria lifelong learning is not dealt with by specific legislation, but by a range of general laws, as follows:

- Decree no.57 of the Council of Ministers on vocational training for the unemployed (1989 and amendments on the Relocation and Efficient Utilisation of Redundant Manpower);
- The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (1991);
- The National Education Act (1991; last amendment in 1998);
- The Labour Code (as amended in 1992);
- Rules of Procedure of the National System for Tripartite Cooperation Decree no.51 (1993);
- The Law on Higher Education (1995; 1999 amendment);
- The Law on Unemployed Protection and Employment Promotion (1997);
- The New Law on Vocational Education and Training (1999 and amendments);
- The Law on the Level of Schooling, the General Educational Minimum and the Syllabus (1999; 2002 amendment)
- The Rules governing the Implementation of the Law on National Education;
- Government Ordinance no.3 on the System of Evaluation;
- Government Ordinance no.4 on the School Documentation;

- The National Report on the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2001);
- The Employment Promotion Act (2002)
- The Bulgarian Lifelong Learning Progress Report (2003);
- The General Strategy of the Ministry of Education and Science on the Development within the next 5 years (2004).

The National Economic Development Plan (2002-2006) is a key strategic document for Bulgaria's commitment to changes in education and training, including lifelong learning. Among its six long-term priorities, priority 4 - "raising the quality of life adapting human resources to the economic conditions" is of strategic importance for the development of lifelong learning. This National Plan includes a special "Human Resources Development Operative Program" which has three main objectives: increasing employment rate by offering more flexible job opportunities; encouraging entrepreneurship; providing social and economic integration for groups who occupy an unequal position in the labour market (those with poor levels education, the Roma population, long-term unemployed, for example). At public authority level, a range of decisions and measures were taken especially by the Council of Ministers and the Branch Ministries to create specialized institutes or departments dealing with lifelong learning issues, including its validation.

The Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science (MES) has been involved in discussions concerning the amendment of the Law of Higher Education (1995), so that it can ensure further coherence between the higher education system of Bulgaria and European trends in the field of access to quality training, possibilities for mobility (introduction of the ECTS) and transparency of acquired qualifications (introduction of the European Diploma Supplement) – key requirements for facilitating the process of mutual recognition of qualifications. In 2003-2004 an "Ordinance Adopting State Requirements for Acquiring Education through Distance Learning in the System of Higher Education" was prepared.

***Example of good practice:***

Some 50% of the study programs in LLL centres within universities are orientated towards increasing the ICT knowledge and skills of specialists within higher education, as well as for all participants attracted by the relevancy of the university lectures and the equipment available for use. The above mentioned Ordinance encourages active and purposeful provision for the acquisition of ICT skills as a means of educational communication.

Thus, *The National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET)*, a specialised body of the Council of Ministers, supports the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) in specific aspects of VET implementation. The NAVET has a Managing Board, with a chairperson appointed by the Prime Minister and with representatives from MES, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), the Ministry of Health and social partners. The work of NAVET is supported by, at present, 13 expert commissions working in various occupational areas following the tri-partite principle.

The main functions of the NAVET are:

- To detail criteria and procedures for licensing and accreditation for approval by MES;
- To issue and remove licenses for vocational training centres and vocational guidance centres;
- To elaborate and propose the MES the list of vocations for vocational education;
- To develop standards for each vocation;
- To participate in the development of the state educational requirements for the documents of the Public Education System and the System for Certification of Vocational Education and Training;
- To assign, coordinate and implement scientific surveys in the field of VET and vocational counselling;
- To support the international recognition of the documents for VET and vocational counselling;
- To develop and update registers of the VET centres and centres for vocational guidance and counselling.

***Examples of good practice:***

- In May 2001 a general framework for the development of standards was prepared by the NAVET and approved by the MES, as was a list of 172 vocations for vocational education and training, based on ISCED 97 classifications. In addition there is the National Qualification System of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP) for professional standards. The system was approved in 1996 and prepared in line with the International Standard Classification ISCO 88. Although ISCED and ISCO classifications have been interlinked through codes established by the NAVET, in practice there are difficulties with implementation. To improve this situation a working group has been established (MLOSP, NSI, MES, Employment Agency) charged with investigating how this implementation period could be shortened in order to provide adequate VET for the labour market.
- The PHARE project “BG 9506: “Vocational Education and Training - Research, Science and Technology” which started in 1996, had the main objective of improving quality in the national VET system. To this end, 18 standards were developed on a pilot basis and a modular approach was introduced in the VET system. A total of 33 pilot schools from 18 towns were involved in the project to implement the modular curriculum approach for vocational training in 18 vocations. After completion of the project, during the period 1999-2004 a total of 31 VET schools introduced the modular approach. In the school year, 2003-2004, 64 VET schools (288 classes and 7000 students) implemented the modular approach in Bulgaria. The number of teachers trained in the modular approach was 594 in 2004 (compared to 217 in 1999).
- The Ministry of Education and Science, jointly with the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Matters under the Council of Ministers, is implementing the PHARE project 2001 related to the educational integration of children from minority groups. This involves the training of teacher assistants (introduced in the 1st grade for helping children from minority groups) and the introduction of a teachers’ qualification for those working in a multiethnic environment.

*The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLOSP)* is responsible for training the employed and unemployed. The MLOSP develops the National Employment Plan (NEP) for consultation with the MES, the Ministry of Regional Development, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Health, and social partners, and for approval of the Council of Ministers. The NEP is the major financial instrument for the implementation of training initiatives.

*The National Employment Service (NES)* was the public institution responsible for employment of the labour force, with responsibility for providing vocational training for the unemployed.

***Example of good practice:***

- Under the “*Back to Work*” project, one of the priority target groups to be included in motivational and vocational training courses are unemployed women over 50 years of age. Under the “*Social Services in Return for New Work Places*” project, unemployed people over 50 are given the opportunity to attend courses on providing social services to disadvantaged people.

Since 2002, *The Employment Agency (EA)* has been the Executive Agency of Labour and Social Policy and replaced the National Employment Service (NES). From 2003 onwards, the EA has been responsible only for active labour market measures (including training), together with its nine regional – and 122 local - labour offices. According to the new law, the National Insurance Agency administrates and pays unemployment benefits.

*The National Council for Tri-partite Partnership* includes permanent committees on such issues as: labour legislation, social insurance regulations, incomes, living standards and training.

*The National Council for Employment Promotion*, established in 2002, advises on the implementation of employment policy and the National Employment Plan.

*The National Council for Vocational Qualification of the Work Force* coordinated the national policy and strategies for training and acquisition of vocational qualifications for employed and unemployed persons.

*The Pre-accession Funds, International Programs and Projects Department (PFIPP)* within the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy is an executive agency under the “Human Resources Development” priority of the NEDP. The main role of this Department is to organise, coordinate and manage the planning, programming, execution, monitoring and evaluation of projects and programs in the field of employment, social protection and equal opportunities, funded by EU pre-accession funds, as well as by other international and bilateral donors.

An example of good practice is the Research Project:

*“Evaluation of the Net Impact of the Active Labour Market Measures Programs, Active in the Labour Market in Bulgaria”* (2001). It points out that training is essential for obtaining and retaining a given job. This type of analysis can support the arguments for expansion of training under active labour market measures.

Through tripartite bodies at the national, regional and local level, the social partners take part in consultations on the development and implementation of the policy on VET and employment. A number of projects have been carried out in the labour market with the participation of social partners. Their effective involvement in validation initiatives is still rather low. Better activities have been organized in the ICT field during literacy campaigns for the adult population, and in the development of local and regional learning centres that bring learning closer to home, using schools or other institutions, linked to local partnerships involving key local actors. ICT developments are also the main reason for public-private partnerships.

***Examples of good practices:***

- Subject: *Development of vocational education and training standards.*
- Lead-up to the establishment of National Requirements for Vocational Training.
- The National Employment Service, with the MLSP, designed and proposed a methodology for the establishment of national requirements for vocational training. Experts representing various ministries, departments and employers’ organisations were assigned to work out drafts for three occupations. The work followed a plan of action, prepared and approved by the participants. The products generated at the separate stages of the work were discussed and approved at specialist meetings. One of the participants on the employers’ side at the national level is the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA).

When the draft national requirements were agreed, training was organised on an experimental basis by established training organisations with a view to check their practicability. The results were as follows:

- All three experiments were successfully completed and the first set of requirements is due to be applied on a broader basis.
- Similar requirements will be worked out shortly for other occupations and specialities, with appropriate conditions for sector and branch being created gradually.
- It is hoped that these actions will standardise content and conditions as well as assessment, recognition and documenting of job skills acquired. At the same time, the intention is to improve the quality of the vocational education and training process, the skill level of the labour force and the country’s competitiveness within the labour market.
- Subject: Linking training institutions with enterprises.  
The Establishment of a Vocational Training Centre in Devnya background:



As a response to the need to upgrade the skills of workers at the Solvay Sodi Combined Works in Devnya, it was decided that a vocational training centre should be set up within the plant. The decision was related to the need to improve the organisation of training, to develop better and more efficient methods of financing and to achieve a higher quality of training in line with specific requirements.

**Description:**

A self-contained Centre for Vocational Training for the personnel of the Combined Works will be established. There are plans to provide opportunities for training geared to specific needs, which will be identified annually, through validation methods like observation. The occupations for which manpower will be trained are included in the official classification of occupations in the manufacturing sector. The types of training available are to include initial training, additional training and retraining. Training will be linked to production needs in terms of use of specialist equipment, product mix and structural, technical and organisational change. Representatives of all the 23 social partners – government institutions, employers, and trade unions – are involved in the work for this Centre’s establishment.

**Examples of good practice in European Projects in Bulgaria:**

- *“The Role of Enterprises and Social Partners in Teachers’ and Trainers’ Professional Development”* (ETF Project D 37, 2004), represented a challenging opportunity for Bulgarian participants to learn theoretical and practical aspects of the teaching profession in the ongoing VET reform. The objective for the 3-year period of this project is to complete the “triangle approach” with the corners representing the three distinct institutions (university/TTT institution, VET school, enterprise) that together have the potential to develop the skills of the teaching profession.
- Bulgaria (together with Romania and 3 other countries in the Balkans) was one of the participants in ETF Project C 17+C32: “Peer Reviews of implementation of VET Policy” (2003-2004). The Foundation’s target was to improve local capacity to assess vocational training systems (including institution-based training, in-companies training, and retraining). ETF arranged learning opportunities for national stakeholders. Bulgarian learning opportunities included guidance on outlining national vocational training policy and regional cooperation.

**Other projects involving social partners are:**

- The nationally representative trade unions and employers have established vocational training centres to provide continuing training for unemployed and employed people. The Centre for Vocational Training at the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) has been licensed by the NAVET to provide vocational training.
- The Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA), which is another nationally representative employers’ organisation, also operates a Centre for Vocational Training. The “Podkrepa” Confederation has established a special unit for syndicate training – a Syndicate Development Confederation Department.

As pointed out in the article “*Social Partner Involvement in Lifelong Learning Examined*” (2005) published by the European Industrial Relations Observatory, in Bulgaria, social partners have got more involved in a range of activities and bodies for increasing the adaptability, employability and career development of workers, and in supporting the delivery of appropriate education and training.

***Example of good practice:***

Another successful project dealt with vocational qualification and focused on employment, social policy, and education. (BG 2003/004-937.05.03). Its overall objectives were: improving labour force mobility and competitiveness with a view to European labour market integration; strengthening the institutional capacity for management and further development of the quality of vocational education and training in Bulgaria.

The project target was to improve the conditions for the provision of quality training for acquiring vocational qualifications.

The project will contribute to the achievement of the following objectives:

“Free Movement of Persons”

- Continue to pursue alignment of mutual recognition of professional qualifications and diplomas and introduce required administrative structures, education and training programs

“Employment and Social Policy”

- Continue to support partners’ capacity-building efforts for their future role in elaborating and implementing EU employment and social policy, including the European Social Fund, and foster structured involvement of social partners, through autonomous bipartite social dialogue.
- Prepare a national strategy, including data collection, with a view to future participation in the European strategy on social inclusion.

Within individual companies there are stakeholders interested in developing validation methodologies. The importance of various LLL areas of training varies according to sector, company size and property type. Thus, in the public sector an increasing concern is the need for validation of foreign language skills; in the private sector, trade and marketing issues are of increasing importance, whereas in mixed property units the target is personal skills development.

As far as the third sector is concerned, various NGOs have developed promising initiatives for non-formal and informal learning programs. One such NGO is the network of the traditional Bulgarian culture and educational centres. At these centres, a range of activities take place, including language courses, music lessons and theatre schools, as well as some professional skills training. The Society for the Propagation of Knowledge is the largest non-profit-making Bulgarian adult education organisation.

There is additional provision for general, vocational and civil education within:

- **societies** such as “Znanie” (a society for the dissemination of scientific and technical knowledge), structures of the centre “Open Education”;
- **schools** such as “Europa” and “Faros”;
- **foundations** such as “Open Society”, “Potential”, “Development of the Civil Society”, “Incobra” and “Time”;
- **educational centres of trade unions** including Bulgarian Unions for Information Technologies, Bulgarian Chamber of Trade; and
- **private institutions** which mostly offer courses for foreign languages and computers.

The national resource centre for career guidance at the Human Resource Development Centre is investigating various possibilities for the implementation of the single European Transparency Framework (Europass). When the decision of the European Parliament and the EU Council concerning the creation of Europass comes into force on 1 Jan. 2005, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Education and Science will have to take a decision on the participation of Bulgaria in the implementation of Europass.

With the support of EU and NGOs, the government has set up ambitious strategies for social and economic inclusion. But these initiatives are very recent and they will need the strong support of the European Social Fund in addition to national funds and adequate institutional building before demonstrating effective results and impact.

### **1.3 Conclusions**

Post-1989 Bulgaria, in common with the other acceding and candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe, has primarily focused on economic and political issues. Its priority targets were the creation of a modern market economy based on the development of an efficient private sector, lower levels of regulation and less state interference in the economy. After decades of existence under totalitarian regimes, the Bulgarian educational system also had to undergo a general reform process to become compatible with the educational systems in the EU states. Bulgaria’s legislation related to LLL reflects a general commitment to universal access to education, training and retraining.

In this context of transitional changes, the lifelong learning concept has been partly embedded in Bulgarian VET / labour market reform (for example, improved access to education as well as to training of adults, and quality of education and training), but an integrated approach to this is needed. Reference can be made in this respect to the development of organised and systematic access to LLL jointly driven by the common support of enterprises and public polices. In Bulgaria (as in Romania and other ACCs), this issue has been lagging behind and is therefore still acknowledged as a key challenge.

But there are many examples of good initiatives for LLL validation that could be put into practice through considerable concerted efforts. This is due in some respects to the fact that the conditions under which Bulgaria has to develop its LLL policy are very different from those in the EU countries and the implementation process is often much harder. Such an example is:

- The Bulgarian vocational schools currently use the list of vocations for educations that applied in 1993. Experience from the EU member states and future ones shows that standards development (vocational and professional standards) takes time. To date in Bulgaria the standards for 25 professions were completed and approved by the NAVET Management Board and approved by MES. These standards apply to both initial and continuing training. According to MES procedures, piloting of the finalized standards started in 2003 and was followed by the gradual development of new vocational curricula in accordance with the standards. The implementation of the new curricula started in 2004/2005 and the process may continue up to 2010 as implementation difficulties may occur. In Bulgaria implementation is based on laws and the respective documents are worked out by individual ministries (some of which only for internal use). Generally the documents do not include targets for implementation, in terms of people, measures, timing and money. This might reduce the impact of the reform process and hinder implementation under the National Employment Plan and PHARE.

This national chapter has attempted to present various validation initiatives and examples of good practice, which are worth reporting on, as they illustrate the process of reasoning and also the state of progress in this particular field in Bulgaria. Selection has been rather difficult, as some examples tackle the implementation of concrete policies, whereas others refer to projects still to be translated into concrete measures. References are also made to some European Projects run by ETF and CEDEFOP in order to transfer the LLL concept to partner countries and to help them translate it into policy actions. Thus, Bulgaria, in common with the other ACCs had an interesting working experience and gained useful benefits from participation in the ETF Project C 37: “Vocational Training Reforms in the Context of LLL”. ETF Project C 17 + C 32: “Peer Reviews on Implementation of VET Policy” arranged learning processes for national stakeholders, Bulgaria included, on outlining national vocational training policy and regional cooperation.

In 2005 ETF and CEDEFOP cooperation will focus on the 4 remaining candidate countries to EU (including Bulgaria) and the main added value will be to help the more effective preparation of these countries for their future integration in CEDEFOP, as well as their full participation in EU policies and networks. With these aims in mind ETF Project WP05-13-05: “Activities including Implementation of Cooperation Programs with CEDEFOP” addresses Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, and Turkey.

The Bulgarian MES has been an active participant in the elaboration of the International Francophone Agency Project on VET development in the Central and Eastern European countries. The standards for acquiring professional qualifications and the pilot promotion of bi-lingual training by profession are under development. The expected results will be related to the recognition of professional qualifications in the European countries.

This positive Bulgarian contribution to LLL validation in Europe, the fact that further vocational education and re-education have been so far the only areas of adult education regulated by law and supported publicly, and of course different changes worked out for the validation of non-formal and in-formal learning are proof of today's modern development of a 126-year tradition of vocational education in Bulgaria.

Bulgaria is expected to join the EU in 2007 and LLL is one of the areas receiving special attention in the run-up. The obvious reason for this is that in the near future Bulgaria has to continue and better focus on important targets, such as:

- To reduce the imbalance between the formal and non-formal/informal components of LLL systems;
- To support non-formal and informal learning by social and managerial recognition, extension and diversification of learning provisions;
- To strengthen the coordination, links and pathways among formal, non-formal and informal learning by improving counselling and promoting cooperation among the different networks;
- To shorten the delay between decision making and practical implementation;
- To strive to achieve by different means better inter-ministerial coordination meant to encourage the shift from sectoral approaches to systemic, integrated reform covering LLL;
- To extend guidance and counselling services beyond the strictly vocational and educational dimension and include more social and citizenship aspects;
- To substantially develop the new funding mechanism and provide more training and education incentives within economic, social and regional programs.

Bulgaria is committed to support the complex development of LLL, which from a national perspective is seen as one of the major factors in improving employment and promoting “active citizenship” to achieve the targets of the Lisbon Economic and Social Strategy and the Copenhagen Declaration on Training and Education.