



# COUNTRY STUDY

## BULGARIA

# Country Monitoring Report

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Bulgaria is still facing huge educational problems, although it has made big efforts during the last years. However, the country still occupies the last place in lifelong learning, has no national framework for non-formal and informal learning, is among the firsts in early school leaving and has a share of NEETs well above EU average. Their reforms are therefore not far reaching enough and need to be more persistent, more coherent and better developed.

### Recommendations

- Improve access to LLL opportunities and further develop the strategy on early school leaving
- Develop a national, coherent scheme for validation of NFIL
- Improve the quality of education and training systems
- Develop the implementation of the strategy on early school leaving (which is still at an early stage)
- Improve the employability and reaching out of NEETs, especially of Roma who are over-represented among the target group





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## BULGARIA

### Social Monitoring Report

#### 1. Promoting access and participation in LLL

Bulgaria continues to occupy the last place in lifelong learning (LLL). The adult participation rate in lifelong learning was 1.7 % compared to an EU average of 10.5 % in 2013. The Commission underlines that increasing the availability of traineeship and apprenticeship schemes, in particular for emerging business sectors identified with business partners, is also vital. This partnership with businesses would help to meet the immediate demand from the labour market for specialists in particular sectors with a lower level of professional qualifications. Following the adoption of the LLL strategy in 2014, the Council of Ministers adopted last February the Action plan for 2015 for the

implementation of the strategy for lifelong learning for the period 2014 – 2020.

This plan has been developed in response to topical challenges related to the high unemployment rate and at the same time the insufficient number of workers with the necessary qualification in the labour market, the aging population and the slow rate of reforms in the educational and training system. It includes activities and objectives directed towards learning in all its forms and degrees, allocated into 8 areas of influence and supporting the acquisition and constant development of key competencies for lifelong learning in one common process.

Bulgaria has made big efforts in terms of promotion and information of LLL. For the first time, Bulgaria will organize the Days for adult learning in order to promote and increase the attractiveness of education. Moreover, the national days dedicated to lifelong learning were celebrated last October for the first time.

#### 2. Vocational Education and Training

Participation of upper secondary students in vocational education and training (VET) is slightly above the EU average (58.5% compared to 55.7% in 2012). During the school year 2014/2015, Bulgaria counted 481 vocational schools in total, with 6383 independent classes. The vocational high schools represented 82% (394 schools) of all schools offering vocational training and the remaining 18% are allocated between sports schools, art schools and vocational colleges. The private vocational schools represent a little more than 10% of all the schools. Those who have completed vocational education represent over one third of the work force and their employment rate was 67.4% in 2014, hence 6 points higher than the total number of the secondary education graduates and 13 points higher than the average level for the country.

According to the Commission, some steps are being



taken to improve the labour market relevance and quality of education. In 2014, the Bulgarian government made amendments to both the vocational education and training (VET) legislation and strategy in order to ensure the quality of VET, validate non-formal and informal learning and improve forms of work-based learning. Changes have also been made to the legislation on the provision of internships and work is ongoing to adapt curricula to better meet labour market needs. Moreover, the introduction and implementation of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) is in the preparation.

The quality of vocational education and training in Bulgaria needs to be improved and better integrated into the general educational structures. Moreover, Bulgaria is facing challenges in responding better to labour market needs and the low standards of quality certification contribute to this poor performance. The sharp decrease in the interest towards vocational education and the worsening quality of the vocational high schools lead to insufficiency of specialists in secondary education. This is evident in a large number of districts in Bulgaria and a number of university graduates occupy positions which do not require higher education. The share of the industrial enterprises suffering from insufficiency of cadres in Bulgaria (15.2%) is twice as high as that in the EU and the country occupies the fourth place in terms of highest necessity of appropriate work force.

### 3. Validation of NFIL

Austria has no uniform legal framework to regulate Bulgaria still has no uniform legal framework or national system, policy or strategy on validation in place which covers all educational sectors. The country also does not have a national institutional framework with clear allocation of responsibilities and coordination between stakeholders<sup>1</sup>. However, it has

1 2014 European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International

made some efforts during the last years, as a project from the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training may prove. This project called 'New opportunity for my future' is linked to the process of validation of the results of non-formal education in the field of VET. The main result of the project is a system of validation of competences gained in non-formal and informal learning. Moreover, there has also been a gradual increase in the engagement of social partners<sup>2</sup>.

The process has so far also reached a change in the attitude of employers, who now have a more positive attitude and acceptance towards validation which is expressed in growing support for validation arrangements. Last but not least, Bulgaria additionally has launched a new initiative for the development of a system for validation - the project 'System for validation of non-formal acquired knowledge, skills and competences' – which is supposed to develop amongst others a systematic approach to validation.

### 4. Early-school Leaving

Bulgaria is among the first in the EU in terms of early school leaving (12.5% compared to 12% in the EU in 2013). As a matter of fact, the average age for school leaving is 14.3 and therefore it occupies the 9th place in school leaving prior to completion of the high school education among the Member states of the EU. Additionally, participation in early childhood education and care is lower than the EU average (87.1% compared to 93.9% in 2012).

However, Bulgaria made a lot of efforts in this area. The National Assembly was able to enact the new Pre-school and School Education Act, which will come into force on 1 August 2016 (with exception of the chapter related to the funding and property which will become effective on 1 January 2017). Amongst

(2014). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014: country report Bulgaria*.

2 Monitoring Report 2014 European Commission (2014). *Education and Training Monitoring Report 2014 – Bulgaria*.



others, the Act foresees that the state will subsidize private kindergartens and schools as of 2018. This was a very controversial issue of the Act and it is therefore all the more pleasant that it was successfully pushed through. Furthermore, the procedure of Support for pre-school education and training of disadvantaged children under the Operational program « Science and education for an intelligent growth » 2014-2020 was launched in October 2015. Last but not least, the National Strategy on Diminishing the Number of Early School Leavers (2013-2020) focuses on ensuring equal access to pre-school and school education and support for personal development in the system. The strategy aims to stimulate cross sectorial partnerships in implementing integrated policy and to ensure an open access to education. It is however deplorable that the strategy on early school leaving is still at an early stage.

## 5. NEETs

Bulgaria is facing a rate of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs) that is well above the EU average: 21.6 %, compared to an EU average of 13 % in 2013. However, a positive tendency was registered with respect to reduction of the youth unemployment in the previous year. In the second quarter of 2015, the unemployment rate for young people aged 15 – 29 was reduced by 2.9 points to 13% (compared to the same period of the previous year) and the unemployment rate for people aged 15-24 was reduced by 1.4 points to 21.9%.

However, the proportion of NEETs among Roma is extremely high, at 61 %, calling for targeted efforts under the Youth Guarantee scheme. Furthermore, Bulgaria has the highest proportion of young NEETs who are not in touch with the employment services and thus are outside the scope of standard labour market activation measures. One of the causes are the strict eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits and social assistance for people without employment experience. A program for youth activation has been created, funded by the national budget. 35 youth

mediators have been appointed to reach out and search for non-registered inactive young people aged up to 29. The program will last until 2017 and the funds for this year amount to 1.3 million BGN.

One of Bulgaria's biggest challenges is to improve the employability of NEET's. In October 2014, a national agreement was signed between the authorities and relevant stakeholders to ensure the delivery of the Youth Guarantee implementation plan. Moreover, a contract with the Employment Agency was signed in January 2015 and it is expected that about 8.000 young people will be hired for apprenticeships and internships. So far, 662 contracts have been concluded with employers and 1142 unemployed young people have started work or training for acquisition of professional qualification and key competencies.

Bulgaria offers several programs that have been launched since 2014. Under the operational program "Human Resource Management", the youth employment procedure is tackling youth unemployment in Bulgaria. Another operation of interest is « New workplace 2015 », announced in June this year.

## 6. Citizenship education

Citizenship education is a separate subject taught at secondary level, both general and vocational upper secondary education. The state has defined the standards and objectives for citizenship education, including the most important social objects (family, school, work environment, small community etc.), development of citizen attitudes and skills; general human values and the laws of the democratic state; the structure and function of the national and the European institutions as well as the citizen society and the orientation in the global and regional processes, responsible participation in public life<sup>3</sup>.

## 7. Council recommendations

In the Country Specific Recommendations for

<sup>3</sup> Monitoring Report 2014 European Commission (2014). *Education and Training Monitoring Report 2014 – Bulgaria*.



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2015, the Council deplores Bulgaria's low quality of the education and training systems as well as their limited relevance to the labour market which hamper the supply of a suitably skilled labour force to the economy. The Council points out that the implementation of the strategy on early school leaving is still at an early stage. Therefore, it recommends to increase the participation in education of disadvantaged children, in particular Roma, by improving access to good-quality early schooling<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> European Council (2015). *Council Recommendation of 14 July 2015 on the 2015 National Reform Programme of Bulgaria and delivering a Council opinion on the 2015 Convergence Programme of Bulgaria*.

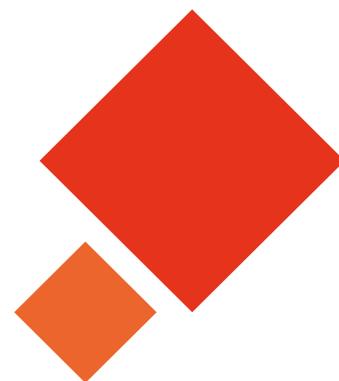






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SOLIDAR, together with our national members and partners, has developed 15 case studies in 2014, presenting innovative, effective, sustainable and tailor made models to promote social inclusion, the social economy and quality job creation by adapting a social investment approach. In their daily work, SOLIDAR members and partners anticipate new or unmet needs of socio-economically vulnerable people and empower them to actively participate in society and to access the labour market.

These case studies gather strong evidence of the social impact of the activities undertaken by our members and partners to help Member States making progress towards the achievement of the social and employment objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the implementation of the Social Investment Package.

SOLIDAR Foundation in cooperation with national members and partners has gathered an examples of national programmes and initiatives that present the innovative and successful approaches that contribute to the process of building inclusive learning societies. The case studies are centred on themes of lifelong learning, civic and citizenship education, the validation of learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, and NEETs (young people Not in Employment, Education or Training).



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