

Quality of Life and the system of Lifelong Learning: national mapping¹

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Качество на живот и системата за учене през целия живот: национално представяне

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***Abstract:** This article is a study of educational and youth policies and their impact on the quality of life of young people in Bulgarian conditions. The analysis is focused on delineating the structural institutions and entities that shape skills and knowledge in young people. The main research questions are: How can lifelong learning and youth policies help young adults move from education to employment? To what extent are these policies effective in contributing to improving the quality of life of young people? The purpose of the article is to outline the picture of the formal education system in Bulgarian conditions and its involvement in the quality of life of young people. Lifelong Learning policies are a good basis for implementing effective programs that facilitate the integration of young people in dynamic labor markets. Such programs are important in a European and national context and overcome social exclusion and distances.*

***Keywords:** quality of life, lifelong learning, policies, labor market*

***Резюме:** Настоящата статия представлява изследване на образователните и младежките политики и тяхното отражение върху качеството на живот на младите хора в български условия. Анализът е фокусиран върху очертаване на ключовите институции и субекти, които формират умения и знания у младите хора. Основните изследователски въпроси са: Как политиките за учене през целия живот и младежките*

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политики могат да помогнат на младите възрастни да преминат от обучение към заетост? В каква степен тези политики са ефективни и допринасят за подобряване на качеството на живот на младите хора? Целта на статията е да се очертае картината на формалната образователна система в български условия и нейната съпричастност към качеството на живот на младите хора. Политиките за Учене през целия живот са една добра основа за прилагането на ефективни програми, които улесняват интеграцията на младите хора в динамичните пазари на труда. Такива програми са важни в европейски и национален контекст и преодоляват социалното изключване и дистанции.

***Ключови думи:** качество на живот, учене през целия живот, политики, пазара на труда*

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, Lifelong Learning (LLL) has become a key policy approach to various social groups with a view to improving their quality of life. Special emphasis is on young people and their entry into the labor market. On the one hand, there is the problem of overcoming the discrepancy between the obtained education diplomas and finding a job in various spheres of the economy and the public sector (Milenkova, Kovacheva, 2020). On the other hand, the share of young people who are unemployed for a shorter or longer time and are outside the employment system is permanently preserved which strengthens the conditions for their marginalization and puts them in an unfavorable situation. Lifelong learning policies themselves aim not only to include vulnerable young people in the labor market, but also to ensure economic growth and create the conditions for a better quality of life. In this way, the policies should be directed to the accumulation of resources as well to the transformation of young people into a social group fit for work.

In this context, we can find a specific instrumental approach in LLL policies - their focus on finding an intersection between the needs of the labor market and the opportunities, preparation, and qualifications of young people. At the same time, we have to take into account another important layer in the LLL programs, related to their humanistic aspect, with the development of the desire to improve skills, the motivation to learn more, as well as the ambition

for personal progress (Milenkova, Kovacheva, 2020b). Thus, the multi-faceted orientation of the LLL policies is important both socially and individually.

Focusing on the mentioned multidimensionality, in this article we review various Bulgarian policies and programs at the national and regional level in order to trace their significance in social terms and for improving the quality of life. In this way, we combine the macro, meso and micro approaches in the analysis. The main research questions of the article are related to showing the effectiveness of policies and programs aimed at young people, as well as the motivation for inclusion in these programs. The review of the labor market-oriented policies aims at achieving harmonization and complementing the opportunities for the realization of youth careers. It is necessary to emphasize that in the Bulgarian conditions, the policies for LLL have a nationwide character and are centralized, in this sense they are valid for both urban and rural conditions. The overall vision of the article is to review the political map in which the various institutional practices stimulating the youth transition to employment are located.

2. The system of lifelong learning and its relations to employment, youth and social policy

The idea, principle and strategy of "lifelong learning" are aimed at increasing equality and responsibility. This can only be achieved if learning is perceived responsibly as a civil right, and the transformation of the educational and labor system is oriented in an egalitarian direction. Ambitious institutional intentions are therefore needed, more liberal relations between work and education; a movement towards "learning organizations", more mobile curricula, widespread development of non-formal learning and larger budgets for education.

Lifelong learning is about developing skills and competences in a formal institution, which then applied in the workplace. LLL is also associated with the learning process repeated throughout an individual's life in both nonformal and informal ways. From the early stages of the EU policy on lifelong learning, the concept and the policies that implement it have expanded to include an understanding of a more holistic process of learning, responding to economic, political, the cultural and social needs of people (Boyadjieva, Trichkova, 2021). The stakeholders involved in the development, implementation and coordination of LLL policies in Bulgarian context include representatives at national, regional as well as at local level. At the national level,

the main actors are various ministries and national authorities². The main social partners – the nationally representative employers’ and employees’ organizations are also involved in the development, and implementation of LLL policies. A third type of actors is the NGO sector. At regional and local level, the LLL policy developed and implemented respectively by various structures³.

We bring data from several sources to trace the dimensions of the educational situation in our country.

Key features based on the 2021 Labor Force Survey, show two parallel trends: on the one hand, there is an increase in young people with higher education, and on the other hand, the share of young people who are excluded from the labor market, as well as NEETs, is increasing

(<https://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/4018/%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%84%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8>). We present the basic data:

- Early school leavers are 12.9%, this is a high relative share that has been maintained for almost a decade.
- The relative share of the population aged 25-34. with completed higher education is 33.6%. This is definitely an achievement and shows an upward trend.
- The relative share of the population aged 30-34 with completed higher education is 32.7%. In this age group, there is also an increase in persons with higher education.
- The relative share of unemployed and non-learning youth aged 15-24 is 14%.
- The relative share of unemployed and non-learning youth aged 15-29 is 17.6%.

In general, data on youth unemployment show that since 2015 until 2019 a drop in values is observed. The trend is gradually changing in 2020, due to the critical health, economic and social situation, when youth unemployment is on the rise. In 2022 gradually the values are normalized. (Table 1)

Table 1 Unemployment rate of persons aged 15-29. (%)

	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022

² Like the Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, National Employment Agency, National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, National Agency for Child Protection, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Health.

³ The Regional Development Council to the Regional governor; the Municipal Council; the Regional Inspectorate for Education; Rectors of universities and Academic Councils, school principals, head of various local non-profit organizations

Men	14,9	10,3	7,5	9,2	11,0	8,8
Women	13,8	9,5	6,1	8,3	9,7	7,0
Total	14,4	9,9	6,8	8,7	10,3	7,9

Source: Eurostat, 2022

The data presented from various sources regarding the unemployment, labor force in Bulgaria, as well as the high percentage of NEETs youth, show the need to develop various programs to increase the qualification and employment of young people. The policies discussed in the next section focus on enabling individuals and communities to integrate into the labor market in order to overcome illiteracy, poverty and unemployment and improve the quality of life of young people.

- *Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in Republic of Bulgaria (2021-30)* The Council of Ministers of Bulgaria adopted the Strategic Framework for Education and Training for the period 2021-30. The framework focuses on the priorities of education and training in the next decade, as well as the specific goals and activities for their implementation. Special attention is paid to the digitization of education and the development of digital competences of young people of different ages. This necessitates innovative approaches to learning principles, curricula and the overall learning process. Overcoming inequalities and developing inclusive education for vulnerable groups is a priority of the Framework. Vocational education and training has a leading role, which develops in line with digital transformations

- *Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2015-2020⁴* and Action plan. It aimed at modernizing the system of vocational education and training in Bulgaria and turning it into an attractive opportunity for learning. The target groups of this Strategy are students over 16 years, the low qualified, minority groups, unemployed, marginal groups, people who need re-qualification or higher qualification.

The most important goal of the presented policies is related to increasing education and qualification, as well as improving the employment conditions of people and groups with different age, ethnic and educational backgrounds.

- *National Youth Program 2023-2025*. It is aimed at young people aged 15-29, by promoting their integration, initiative and awareness, non-formal education and training, lifelong

⁴This is the last strategy in place.

learning. Emphasis is placed on the stimulation of youth initiatives and campaigns, equal access to activities for young people from small settlements and improvement of youth infrastructure conditions. The aim is to expand the experience and skills of young people for inclusion in the values of civil society and to create a favorable environment in which they can develop their potential and have their additional personal achievements. It is envisaged that during the implementation of the Program, for each year of its fulfilment, no less than 20% of young people will be covered, including through communication campaigns and social networks and media.

- *National Strategy of the Republic Bulgaria for equality, inclusion and participation of the Roma (2021-2030)*. The strategy fits into the context of the development of European integration and inclusion policies. In order to achieve the long-term goal of ensuring effective equality and reducing the differences between the Roma and the rest of the population, in the Strategy, to the previous key areas: education, employment, health care, housing conditions, culture, rule of law and anti-discrimination, three are added mutually reinforcing horizontal goals: equality, inclusion, participation.

3. Policy implementation

Overall, the implementation represents a performance of a particular policy, measure or a program. For the successful implementation of a policy, it is necessary to:

- identify objectives and a series of interrelated and consistent actions and tasks that decompose the overall process of conducting, coordinating, monitoring, realization and policy execution. The system of tasks defines the structural elements of the process of introducing policies and their performance – initiatives, competences, communication processes, consultations, deadlines, corrective actions, reporting and responsibilities within the whole policy implementation process;

- reach target groups and communities on which policies focus. Only with this approach, by integrating all actors into the process of strategic planning, consultation and program formulation, efficiency in the implementation of particular policies can be achieved;

- develop and follow a well-planned methodology related to identifying a network of institutions and actors to become specific implementers of the policy.

This meta-level structure has its concretization in the national and regional contexts that show how a policy is actually being carried out and acted with all possible modifications, adaptations and transformations.

Additionally, there are a number of difficulties that can hamper policy implementation, for example these could be: large number of tasks, poor planning, lack of administrative capacity, and especially insufficient funds. Another serious problem is the lack of adequate consultation and two-way communication with the target groups, which hinders the achievement of the desired results.

All these make the implementation of policies and measure quite a challenging task, which success depends on the interaction of diverse factors at many levels.

The basic aims and objectives of all measures carried out can be summarized as provision of variety of options that can be divided into several areas: vocational guidance for young people; training in professional qualifications or key skills; subsidizing temporary employment; helping employers to open new jobs; support for youth entrepreneurship; provision of services from professional network, etc. The key goal is to reduce the inactive population, improve the efficiency of the local labour market and promote economic activity. The significance of the studied policies is in supporting young people in the country to achieve their realization. The programs are associated with high expectations - solving the problem of youth unemployment and ensuring effective workforce and they aim at enhancing the adaptability of the workforce to labour market requirements.

The link between the objectives of the programs and the local needs is mainly in two directions: on the one hand, public institutions aim to promote economic activity by increasing employment, and on the other hand, they aim to increase employment corresponding to the needs and requirements of local stakeholders.

The target groups in almost all cases examined can be summarized in the age group "under 25 years of age or up to 29-year-old", who have different levels of education and employment. Most of these young adults are inactive, including the discouraged people who remain out of youth unemployment statistics. Similar are young people at risk of social exclusion and becoming NEETs being vulnerable to a lesser or greater extent.

Majority of the LLL policies related to analyzed Bulgarian cases follow the "nonlinear" assumption of young people life, although with certain difficulties at the transitions to adulthood.

In the linear life course trajectories, there is a certain consistency and continuity between different stages of the life cycle and this sequence runs smoothly and without crashes or crises. Linear is the model: learning - work that corresponds to the direct transition from adolescence to

maturity. In "non-linear" life course trajectories observed disruptions, delay or parallel flow of life cycles, as both learning and work for a shorter or longer period. In this model, transitions are hampered by unemployment, limited job offers, or work not in the completed specialty.

4. Consistency of LLL policies

The mapping of the national policy documents, which have been focusing on LLL shows that consistency in the design, implementation and evaluation of different policy field in support of youth lifecourse transitions has become a significant policy concern. The overarching aim of these policy initiatives is to invest human and financial resources. They are implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP), and National Employment Agency as well as by their regional structures as *cross-sectoral policies* backed mainly by funding from *European programs* in several directions:

- *guaranteeing equal access and high-quality education to students from vulnerable communities*, through for example the exemption of vulnerable groups from tuition fees for education in university. An important point of the measures to disadvantaged groups is the opportunity for continuing education in the formal system after completing courses in literacy funded by European Structural Funds. In this direction is The Strategy for the development of vocational education and training (2015-2020) aiming to upgrade the system of vocational training to a point to become more attractive, especially to young persons from vulnerable families. A successful example at regional level is "New Chance for Success" and Program – module "Improving Adult literacy": teaching illiterate and poorly literate people over the age of 16 in order to facilitate their competitive participation on the labor market.

- *reducing the share of early school leavers* under 11% and raising the share of tertiary education graduates (aged 30–34) to 36%.

- *bringing education closer to the labor market* as the introduction of dual training, which means practical training in a real working environment and training in a vocational school or a vocational high school. In this context we should take into consideration the validation of knowledge and skills acquired through informal training or non-formal education. Non-formal education provides full or part-time vocational courses and courses in literacy for adult illiterates (e.g. acquisition of a specialty, starting a business), funded primarily by the Structural funds. The implementer is the National Employment Agency (NEA), which prioritizes long-term unemployed and people lacking professional qualification. In this direction is also Operational

Program “Science and Education for Intelligent Growth”. This structural instrument encompasses the investment priority “Improving equal access to long–life learning opportunities for all age groups in formal, non-formal and unofficial manner; updating of knowledge, skills and competencies of the workforce, and promoting flexible learning processes, including vocational guidance and validation of acquired competences”.

Special attention is paid to promoting university units for continuous, ongoing or post-graduate training, career development centers as well as continuing the incentives for development of electronic forms for distance learning, that provide more mobile lifelong learning opportunities.

It could be said that, in its implementation policies regarding education and lifelong learning, labor market, social welfare and youth adopted as laws and strategies in Bulgarian conditions have the opportunity to be realized thanks to financing under European programs and grants. It was through the European programs actually achieve the establishment of cross-sectoral programs and maintaining joint objectives of the various institutions and players, working at national - regional - local level. The other aspect that runs partnership is the relation: public - private – nongovernmental sector.

In recent years, Bulgaria has achieved significant results in the area of social inclusion through the implementation of comprehensive and integrated approach across different policy sectors. Despite progress, however, there are still a number of challenges in the field of poverty and social exclusion, especially in the context of the economic and financial crisis. The achievements of high and sustainable economic growth, stable macroeconomic environment and public finances are important prerequisites and have a direct contribution to the implementation of the policy priorities to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion. The level of poverty directly correlated with the levels of socio-economic inequalities, which are one of the main factors behind the deepening of poverty. For this reason, efforts should directed towards the prevention and the causes that give rise to poverty and social exclusion with a view to a permanent overcome. The high level of poverty among the unemployed and inactive persons clearly shows that lack of employment is one of the main causes of poverty and social exclusion.

That is why the main priority is to promote the active inclusion of those who are furthest away from the labour market - economically inactive young people, the long-term unemployed, people on social assistance, people with primary or lower education and without professional

qualifications or with a lack of key competences, people with permanent disabilities, older workers and others.

In this context, with a strongly growing role of education, a major challenge is the drastic decline in the quality of school education in Bulgaria over the last 20 years. The large-scale Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the OECD, often demonstrate that one of the lowest educational attainment results is that of Bulgarian students. Furthermore, higher education produces more graduates than the labor market demands while in some sectors there is the opposite situation – high business demands and very low supply of such skills.

Several circumstances prevent policies and strategies from being embedded in the political landscape and related systems. These are a number of ineffective interventions due to insufficient administrative capacity. The legal and political macro framework (e.g. strategies and laws) largely correspond to the educational problems and plan the necessary actions. Supporting action plans have resulted in appropriate interventions, but with insufficient or no funding allocated. Some of the political documents remained only on paper or adopted only formally. There is a lack of internal coherence between the different levels of the education system: while the developed plans approved at the national level, most of the educational institutions at the regional level remain passive observers. All this shows that in Bulgarian conditions there are some problems related to the practical implementation of policies and programs adopted at the national and regional level and which relate to young people.

5. Conclusion

In recent years, the legislative framework creates a favorable environment for the development of lifelong learning. Adopted laws and strategies are indicative of the commitment of the national governing bodies in this process. In particular, efforts aimed at improving the quality of education, especially vocational training and strengthening links with employers' requirements. Measures have been taken for the development of career guidance in the school and employment system. Many of practical actions aimed at acquiring higher qualifications and develop key competencies of people over 16 years, including the unemployed or low-skilled.

The LLL policies belong to three different sets, aiming at reducing dropout rate, enhancing social inclusion and competitiveness on the labor market of marginalized communities, encouraging pupils from disadvantaged families to continue their education, etc.

These are preventive measures (such as improving the quality of education, focusing on practical orientation, access to quality education for students from ethnic communities); intervening measures (e.g. raising the quality of education, prequalification of teachers, provision of career orientation services) and compensatory measures (e.g. reintegration of dropouts, improving adult literacy).

A significant step forward in the development of the Bulgarian LLL system is the eagerness to take up and implement renewed patterns and good practices from the global educational experience. Bulgarian LLL institutions could essentially benefit from communicating with various teaching and learning cultures and could enrich the scope of activities and their capacity for tutoring and socializing young adult generations.

The mapping and review of the LLL policies at the national level as a whole revealed the following major problems in the young people's transition from education to work:

- Existing disparity between the acquired knowledge and the following realization.
- The state expenditures for integrating of young people on the labor market are insufficient.
- Youth unemployment is not always a priority in government unemployment policy.
- Insignificant scope of the specialized active policies on the labor market and a low share of participation of young unemployed (more than 90% of all unemployed young people are not included in the specialized active policies on the labor market).
- Integration between the macroeconomic and public policies on the labor market not obtained.

Despite all the positive aspects of these policies, they are not enough to overcome youth unemployment and significantly increase youth employment.

It appears that there are some weaknesses that need to be overcome in order to successfully implement the various programs and measures. The policies examined in their entirety show that there is a strong will on the part of political structures at the national level to facilitate the transition from education to employment.

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