

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROBLEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

Sevdalina Dimitrova*

*Higher School of Security and Economics, e-mail: sevdalinaid_bg@mail.bg



Abstract: In the last almost 25 years, a frequently discussed topic in the public space is the quality of higher education, not only by experts in this field, but also by people far from the educational process. It is easy to suggest the opinion about the poor quality of the educational product of Bulgarian higher education institutions and the need for almost continuous reforms in the educational system of our country, justifying itself with the place of Bulgarian higher education institutions in the European space of higher education. And if some of the changes have a positive effect, then a significant part of them are not only ineffective, but also bring a large dose of negativity to Bulgarian higher education. Especially in the last few years, when a number of defects have been noticed in the legislative framework of higher education and the development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, leading to a number of untenable decisions and self-dealing at the university level by some rectors' managements. Undoubtedly, actions of this kind undermine the authority of both the academic staff and the students and the entire system of higher education, which feeds the opinion of the apologists who support the idea of poor-quality higher education in Bulgarian higher education institutions. Yes, to a certain extent, some deviations in the quality of education are noticeable in some higher education institutions, especially in the years of transition from a centralized market economy and a democratic society. Yes, with the introduction of the law on the development of the academic com Higher education institutions in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation, which replaced the Law on Scientific Degrees and Scientific Titles, in the first years there was a boom in the number of elected professors and associate professors in universities, after which actions were taken to regulate this process with changes in the legislation, in order to introduce Mini Higher education institution National Requirements for the Academic Staff and Academic Positions and registration with the National Academy of Sciences and Humanities. In parallel, a Criteria System of the NEAA for Evaluation and Accreditation was introduced in accordance with the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Moreover, the parallel evaluation of professional fields according to the schedule of the National Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation is already a fact for the purpose of comparability and measurability of training in specialties in a given professional field in different universities in the interest of improving the quality of the educational process. Against the background of the above processes, the scientific reflections of the author, who has 38 years of experience as a university lecturer, are provoked by the observations and established problem areas in higher education. This is the purpose of this publication to examine the problematic areas in state higher education institutions, provoked both by some legislative defects and by the unilateral decisions of some rectors' managements.

Keywords: higher education, higher education management, higher education issues

Field: Social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

The dynamic changes in the socio-political, economic and social environment in the Republic of Bulgaria are causing significant metamorphoses in the development of the higher education system in the country. The reasons for this are both objective and subjective. Higher education is facing increasingly high demands against the backdrop of the development of IT and the digitalization of the educational process. The expectations of the digital generation are sometimes not justified due to insufficient resources for the activities of state higher education institutions to renew HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONs material base and scientific infrastructure. And although since 2014, with the participation of higher education institutions in projects financed under the Operational Program Science, Education and Smart Growth (OPSESG), National Roadmap for Scientific Infrastructure (NRSI), significant changes have occurred in its renewal, centers of excellence and centers of competence are being built, the overlay of negative public attitudes and the discrepancy between the expectations of society with the receipt of the educational product from higher education continues. The proclamation of the suggestion that higher education in our country is not at a sufficient level and of high quality continues. There are many defenders of the idea that it is time to close some state universities, due to HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONs large number, unfortunately among them are some politicians who, with HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONs actions, contribute to the negative attitudes of society towards higher education. Of course, such a suggestion is exaggerated and unjustifiably unfounded. But the fact that there are some problem areas in the higher

*Corresponding author: sevdalinaid_bg@mail.bg



education system is a fact that should not be underestimated. And then, when we allow ourselves to talk openly about them, then adequate decisions can be made in the interest of protecting Bulgarian higher education. This is the reason why the author of this publication allows himself to share some of his thoughts on the problems of higher education from the standpoint of his professional experience and a participant in the accreditation process on both sides of it in response to a number of questions from society, which increase negativity towards Bulgarian higher education institutions. This also determines the goal of our scientific research, with an emphasis on the objective and subjective factors influencing the activities of public higher education institutions and the reasons, primarily subjective, giving rise to certain problem areas.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

More than one or two publications have been written on the problems in the higher education system. Even the author of this publication himself has several previous ones. And if attention has been focused primarily on the quality of education and the criteria for assessing the scientific quality of the academic staff, some problems related to the management of the higher education system have remained and remain out of reach. Observing the processes in various state higher education institutions, it is striking that in some state higher education institutions the management of HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS governing bodies, intoxicated by the power granted to them by the legislative framework and academic autonomy, lack sufficient managerial skills or rather they misunderstand the principles of management, mixing them with egocentrism. Thus, a number of decisions have been made from the positions of authority, not respecting the academic rights and freedoms of the human factor. This is the reason why, in studying the issues in this publication, in addition to the research, comparative approach, the managerial approach in its comprehensiveness is also used, which is the basis of strategic decisions for the quality of training and the educational process in the interest of the place of the HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION in the European Higher Education Area. Moreover, the expediency of managerial decisions requires the applicability of both the analytical and logical approaches, taking into account the environmental factors - internal and external.

3. RESULTS

The system of higher education in Bulgaria in its historical development has undergone its changes in positive and negative aspects. And if in the mid-90s of the last century, when our country had already embarked on the path of transition to building a market economy and a democratic society, the legislative framework of higher education and the development of the academic staff contributed to the positive effects in its development and the well-intentioned public attitudes, then in the last 10 years or so the negative public attitude prevails. The reasons are Higher education institution-layered with an objective and subjective nature. One part is caused by the lack of certain regulatory framework, another part by the previous inability of the Council of Rectors to have legislative powers, a third part by demographic problems in the country, a fourth group of reasons is caused by the systematic financial shortage of state HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS and the wrong system for HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION financing according to the number of students, which reflects on the quality of education, a fifth group of reasons is reduced to the allowed politicization of the educational system, which is reflected in the legislative and regulatory provisions, which also reflects on the choice of the governing bodies of HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, a sixth group of reasons is related to the openness of the educational market and the preferences of young people to acquire higher education and qualifications in foreign universities, the not always good basis of previous education in the secondary course of study, which hinders the process of upgrading knowledge and skills, and last but not least - the insufficient management experience or misunderstanding of the management of the educational process in some state HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, which reflects on the insolvency and subjectivity of management decisions, bordering on disrespect for academicism and professionalism of the human factor, respectively, and the quality of education. Of course, the above groups of reasons are not the only ones, many more can be listed, but some of them, arising from the lack of continuity and consistency in the upgrading of the educational and management process, give rise to reflections on the problems and the search for ways to overcome them.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The starting point of our scientific research is the regulatory framework of higher education and

the development of the academic staff, the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021 - 2030 and other strategic documents - national and EU, the national program "Popularization of Bulgarian Higher Education and Facilitation of Access for Applications of Persons of Bulgarian Ethnicity Living Abroad for Study in Bulgarian Higher Education Institutions", publications on the researched issues, opinions of the Institute for Market Economics, interviews with the Chairman of the Council of Rectors, opinions of business representatives and other sources engaged in the problems of higher education and, last but not least, the observations and professional experience of the author. On this basis, the discussions are based on the retrospection of the environment and the state of the higher education system.

Undoubtedly, the dynamic changes in the higher education environment also determine the challenges and trials before it. Here, we should also take into account the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the higher education system in our country, indicated in retrospect and clearly outlined in the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021 - 2030 (SG, 2021). On this basis, in the effort to bring the legislative framework of higher education and the development of the academic staff in line with European strategic documents and national programs, in the period 2015 - 2020, significant amendments and additions were made to the Higher Education Act, the Academic Staff Development Act and the accompanying by-laws. And all this in the interest of expanding access and increasing the share of graduates in our country. On the one hand, a number of improvements have been made to the regulation of the higher education system and the development of the academic staff, but at the same time, some aspects remain outside the regulation, which subsequently give rise to some problem areas. Leading among them are:

- still not sufficiently implemented connection education - labor market, regardless of the legislative changes and actions taken in this direction through the protected and priority specialties. The reasons on the one hand are lack of interest or lack of sufficient knowledge about these specialties, or preferences for training abroad in these specialties without subsequent realization in the country. On the other hand, the business does not always show interest in graduating students and providing an opportunity for realization or realization against unsatisfactory pay. As a result of this, the resulting deficit of specialists in certain socio-economic areas. The solution is to create a mechanism to motivate the admission of students in these specialties with the necessary calculations together with the business on a contractual basis and an obligation to ensure realization by the business;

- politicization of higher education, manifested in individual legislative norms and the search for political dividends from untenable proposals, a recent example of which is the exemption from tuition fees, without coordination with the Council of Rectors and HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, dooming them to deprivation of financial resources and bankruptcy. Often, a number of legislative norms are adopted without taking into account the requests and opinions of HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS and the academic Higher education institution. Others are adopted populist without providing the necessary financial resources for Higher education institution implementation, such as the example of the Higher education institution payment for assistant professors, without providing the resources for this and other academic positions, which gave rise to the corresponding protest actions; And despite the additional financial assistance provided to certain HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS with a significant shortage of financial resources, it is again insufficient and does not guarantee the implementation of legislative norms. No less a problem in this regard is the opposition of individual HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS regarding the Higher education institution of academic staff and regarding the additional payment for the educational and scientific degree "doctor" and the scientific degree "doctor of sciences". The solution to overcome this problem is depoliticization of the education system, compliance with and financial security of legislative norms, non-admission of different Higher education institutions for the same academic position and transfer of responsibilities to the relevant higher education institution, as well as the confrontation between higher education institutions.;

- lack of an appropriate mechanism for financing higher education institutions, where for years the subsidy was granted for the number of students without taking into account the demographic crisis. Moreover, the practice of announcing admissions by state order exceeding the number of secondary school graduates continues. The currently applicable methodology for determining the coefficient of higher education institutions by professional field is also seriously criticized, the risk of which is inequality between universities and increased admissions to certain fields with a higher coefficient, without taking into account the opportunities for realization after graduation. Decisions in this direction should be made jointly with the Council of Rectors and specialists from the Ministry of Education through the development of scenarios and the selection of a suitable one that satisfies state higher education institutions. Moreover, funding should be tied as a priority to the quality of education;

- insufficient applicability of modern and effective forms of training, without taking into account the needs of the modern digitalized generation;
- lack of understanding or reluctance to develop joint educational programs with foreign higher education institutions, even where such programs are implemented to some extent, there are “advisors” who hinder Higher education institution development and expansion;
- an insufficiently developed system for motivating and financially supporting research and publication activity, which forces the academic staff to allocate personal resources for this from Higher education institution already modest budget. This is also the reason why young researchers leave universities. The solution is for each higher education institution to have a developed and applicable methodology for objective payment of research and publication activity supporting academic development and the pursuit of development in science. It is advisable to create a Fund for financing participation in scientific events and for publishing scientific works at the national level and distributing it according to the results of scientific research.
- insufficiently demonstrated connection between scientific research and the educational process, as well as detachment of scientific research from the practical challenges of society, the overcoming of which problem is through linking the taught educational material with the scientific achievements of the academic staff in the relevant field.
- insufficient practical training of students, as in many HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONs the aim is to theorize the taught course material through lecture courses at the expense of practical classes and the acquisition of practical skills. The reasons are both in the insufficient practical training of part of the academic staff, and in the insufficient attraction of specialists from practice for the purposes of the educational process, although the legislation has regulated this process. Last but not least, practical classes require greater flexibility, diverse forms and preliminary preparation. This is also the reason for the discrepancy between the expectations of business from the education of the specialists they need. The solution is to distribute the hours in a given discipline 50:50% lectures-practical training and closer cooperation with specialists from business.
- lack of regulations to fill the shortage of candidate students and announced admission of foreign students and attraction of students from the Bulgarian diaspora, and in this regard, at the last meeting of the Council of Rectors in October this year, specific decisions and actions were identified. A national program for attracting foreign students to Bulgaria is to be developed, accompanied by an annual indicative budget, with the aim of using the potential of higher education institutions for training students who cannot be provided by the domestic market of educational services due to the demographic crisis in the country.;
- lack of involvement of academic staff (primarily associate professors and professors, in some cases also assistants) in some HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONs with the training process and at the same time receiving additional remuneration for project activity, which is listed in Higher education institution job descriptions. In parallel, the practice is being strengthened in some HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONs for assistants to give lectures as a priority, regardless of legislative norms and the requirement that lecture courses, especially in mandatory disciplines, 70% of Higher education institution teaching hours be conducted by habilitated academic staff. Moreover, these HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONs attract assistants on a fee basis, who are also assigned lecture courses, in addition to practical classes.
- subjective and complicated indicators and subjective assessment of the NEAA, which are confirmed by the constantly changing criteria and the inclusion of academic staff without experience in accreditation procedures in the expert groups. This problem is also supported by lobbying in the conduct of accreditation procedures for certain HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONs, non-compliance with some requirements of the legislative framework for ownership of property, etc. etc. To this we should add lobbying for the approval of members of standing committees and the accreditation council upon the proposal of the Council of Ministers. The above circumstances in themselves imply and implement a subjective assessment of some HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONs.
- loss of academic staff with proven professionalism and age discrimination, as in recent years there has been a massive outflow of academic staff both at a young age with scientific potential and a discriminatory attitude towards academic staff over 65 years of age. As a result, the practice of dismissing this academic staff with proven professional experience, scientific potential, established scientists at the will of the rector-employer or his deputies is being established without clear criteria, without prior discussions based on subjective opinion, regardless of Higher education institution academic employment on the principle of “inconvenient”. Observations show that the result of these actions is a reduction of departments, faculties, professional areas to the critical minimum and often a lack of quorum for holding the relevant meetings. Moreover, in some higher education institutions, as a result of such subjective

actions of Higher education institution rector's leadership during accreditation procedures, it is observed that the lack of professors in certain professional areas and often one habilitation with the academic title "associate professor" in a field is observed. The solution is to change the legislation and return to universities authoritative and proven with Higher education institution professionalism learned professors and associate professors in the universities and auls in the interest of the quality of education and raising the prestige of the higher education institution.;

- lack of academic responsibility and a model of management in the interest of the public interest, supported by the frequent practices in some HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS of ignoring the basic principles in the higher education system, including continuity, innovation and creativity, observance of academic autonomy, academic rights and freedoms, academic ethics, responsibility, transparency and accountability, objectivity and impartiality in decision-making. The practice of ignoring continuity when the rector's leadership takes office and considering that the chronology of the HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION is only just beginning, of lightly canceling lawful orders of predecessors, of confusing management with command and egocentrism, of holding cheap PR events, of ignoring the dignity and honor of proven professionals is increasingly being established. A confirmed practice in some HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS is that management decisions are made on the principle of "convenient" / "inconvenient", "someone said", etc. etc., having nothing to do with the principles of the managerial approach, without thinking about the consequences for the HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION and its future;

- lack of sufficient legislative norms for control and allowing retroactivity in the legislation, taking into account in this case the insufficient regulation of control regarding violated procedures for academic growth, plagiarism and the responsibilities of the governing bodies of the HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION for unlawful actions. Moreover, the legislation allowed retroactivity regarding plagiarism for past procedures at a time when anti-plagiarism checks were not required. Yes, the author maintains an opinion on not allowing plagiarism as a norm, but at the same time anti-plagiarism actions should have a more preventive effect before a given procedure for academic development, thereby creating a culture of correct citation and use of other people's works. The other thing that is happening is more like "settlement of scores".

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, without the author's claims for exhaustiveness of the researched issues, the reflections on the mentioned problems cannot be referred to a common denominator for all state HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS. They are a product of the personal observations and professionalism of the author, whose cause is quality training and educational process, which will establish the higher education system of the Republic of Bulgaria in the European Higher Education Area, whose place there is indisputable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my gratitude to the Higher School of Security and Economics for the opportunity provided to me and the conditions for my establishment and recognition as a professional and scientist.

REFERENCES

- Forbes Bulgaria (2024). Higher education does not need easy solutions, but smart ones. Viewed: <https://forbesbulgaria.com/2024/02/05/higher-education-does-not-need-easy-but-smart-solutions/>
- Georgieva, T. (2024). The Council of Rectors discusses a National Program for Attracting Students from Non-EU Countries. <https://banker.bg/2024/10/10/savetat-na-rektorite-obsazhda-naczionalna-programa-za-privlichane-na-studenti-ot-strani-izvan-es/>
- Kovachev, K. (2024). The experiment with higher education raises many questions. Viewed: <https://www.marginalia.bg/eksperimentat-s-visheto-obrazovanie-porazhda-mnogo-vaprosi/>
- Kostadinova, S. (2024). Opinion of the Institute of Market Economics on the draft Decision of the Council of Ministers on the approval of the draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Higher Education – 02 February 2024. Institute of Market Economics. Viewed: <https://ime.bg/analyses/stanovishte-na-ipi-otnosno-proekt-na-reshenie-na-ministerski-syvet-za-odobryavane-na-proekt-na-zakon-za-izmenenie-i-dopylnenie-na-zakona-za-vishe-to-obrazovanie-02-fevruari-2024-g/>
- Kostianev, S. (2018). The problems in education are in quality, quantity and money. Viewed: <https://trud.bg/%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%B%D0%B8%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%BE-%D1%81%D0>

- Law on Higher Education (2024). State Gazette, No. 81 of 24 September 2024.
- Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (2022). State Gazette, issue 102 of 23 December 2022.
- Maslyankova, Z. (2024). The Council of Rectors discusses whether the proposals for changes to the Higher Education Act are working. Viewed: <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/102057413>
- Maslyankova, Z. (2024). The money from the budget is not enough for the financial stability of higher education institutions. Viewed: <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/102058254/savetat-na-rektorite-parite-ot-budjeta-ne-sa-dosta-ta-chni-za-finansovata-stabilnost-na-visshite-uchilishta>
- Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the Period 2021-2030 (2021). State Gazette, Issue 2 of January 8, 2021
- Todorov, D. (2021). Chaotic Intentions for Changes in Higher Education. Viewed: <https://kultura.bg/web/%D1%85%D0%B0%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%B2%D1%8A%D0%B2-%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%81/>
- Vetova, A. (2024). It is necessary to take care of Bulgarian science and education as a main national priority, the Council of Rectors states. Viewed: <https://www.bta.bg/bg/news/lik/669947-neobhodimo-e-grizhata-za-balgarskata-nauka-i-obrazovanie-da-e-izvedena-kato-osno>