

## **IMPLEMENTING YOUTH TARGETED EDUCATION AND LLL POLICIES AT REGIONAL LEVEL**

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**Abstract.** This article aims to present most of the main national policies that are oriented towards education and lifelong learning. Different aspects of policies that are revealed focus attention on key issues faced the conditions for increased participation of all ages people in education and learning.

The article also presents several programs implemented in Blagoevgrad region, focused on facilitating the transition from the educational institution to the labor market. The analysis is aimed at showing positive and critical moments in the implementation of different programs and projects at regional and national level. The article is based on results obtained by the project under Horizon 2020 program in which the authors participate.

*Keywords:* lifelong learning policies; educational policy; education efficiency

### **1. Introduction**

The role of education is increasingly becoming a function of the efforts of many social players facing different communities. In this context, lifelong learning - as an approach and system of activities - is becoming more and more important in today's contexts, with the understanding that individuals need to develop their skills, to improve their knowledge and qualifications, to compete with the changing world and be able to participate actively in the labor market.

An important milestone in the implementation of LLL policies are research projects. This is the project "YOUNG ADULLLT – 'Policies Supporting Young Adults in their Life Course. A Comparative Perspective of Lifelong Learning and Inclusion in Education and Work in Europe', team coordinator Prof. Ph.D. Marcelo Parreira do Amaral from University of Munster, funded under the Horizon 2020 Program<sup>1)</sup>; conducted in 2016 – 2019.

The project includes 15 partners from 9 European countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Scotland, Finland, Croatia. On the Bulgarian side, two teams are involved:

- from South-West University „Neofit Rilski“ with team leader Prof. Dr. Georgi Apostolov;
- from Plovdiv University, with team leader Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sijka Kovacheva.

The focus of the project is European, national and regional policy orientated towards young adults<sup>2)</sup> and especially those at risk of social exclusion. The project aims at gaining knowledge about the impact of LLL policies on life paths, plans, strategies of young people and the ways in which these policies become more effective.

## **2. Mapping of national policies**

In this section some of educational and LLL policies are presented. We start with the national and then move on to the regional specific. A main challenge is the strong tendency toward centralization of policies in Bulgaria.

### **2.1. General Education Policy**

Education in Bulgaria is mainly supported by the state through the Ministry of Education and Science. School education is free and compulsory for children from 7 to 16 years of age. The education system consists of the following levels: pre-primary education, primary education, secondary education and higher education.

The key policy documents (or parts of them) clearly related to lifelong learning in the country are:

– **Vocational Education and Training Act**; Last amendments – 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015. Its target groups are students over 16 years, low qualified, minority groups, unemployed, marginal communities, people who need re-qualification, people who need higher qualification. The Act defines organization, management, financing of the system of vocational training in and outside formal education system (for students over 16 years as well), creates institutions of vocational training and entry exams for students, develops state requirements for vocational education. The Act determines the structure of the vocational education programs. It envisages Centres for vocational training and Centres for vocational guidance. Defines credits (their accumulation and transfer) in vocational education and training.

The amendment (Art. 5, par. 4) in 2014 envisages that vocational training can be carried out in the apprenticeships (way of learning through work-dual training), which is a form of partnership between vocational school (high school, college) and one or more employers. Another change in the Act (Art.5, par. 5) allows validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences obtained through non-formal or informal education or learning. The Act formulated certain rules on the procedure for recognition and certification of professional knowledge, skills and competencies. The Vocational Education and Training Act creates National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET), which is a state authority (under the Council of Ministers) licensing activities in the vocational education and training, as well as

controlling and coordinating institutions providing vocational guidance, training and education.

– **Higher Education Act – Last amendments: 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016**

The Act regulates the structure, functions and management of higher education aimed at providing highly qualified post-secondary education. The target groups of this law are persons aged 18+ with an acquired secondary education. The Act defines several types of higher schools as well as the forms of education stipulated as: daily, evening, extra-mural, and distance (Art. 42 par. 10). Another focus of the law connected with LLL is envisaging the system of upgrading vocational qualification (Art. 43 par. 1), which is structured in various departments for continuing and postgraduate training as well as Centers for carrier guidance and Centers for carrier development. The aim is to realize the links between universities and business, between students and the labor market, for practical training in a real working environment. A goal stipulated in the law is the integration disadvantaged groups. According to the Higher Education Act (Art. 68) some disadvantaged groups are accepted on “simplified terms provided that they have successfully taken part in the admission examinations: people with permanent disabilities and diminished work capacity of 70 and over 70%; war veterans; orphans; mothers with three or more children.” The last amendments (2016) the law (Art. 95 par. 7), exempt the above mentioned disadvantaged groups from paying tuition fees. The law empowers the university authorities to introduce additional incentives and forms of support for students in the own regulations.

– **Act on recognition of professional qualifications** was adopted in response to the EU requirements for full correspondence of Bulgarian legislation on matters related to the recognition of professional qualifications of citizens of the European Union Member States and some third countries.

Besides the legal acts there are several important strategic documents of significance for the LLL policy:

– **Strategy for Higher Education development in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2014 to 2020.** The Strategy outlines the key priorities in the field of higher education. The aim is to achieve a higher education system that is able to regulate itself according to the dynamics of social processes and to maintain the quality of higher education, i. e. a sustainable system. The target groups of the Strategy are persons aged 18+ with an acquired secondary education. The specific objectives of the Strategy related to LLL are: improved access and increased share of graduates (reaching the level of 36% of university graduates among the the age group 30 – 34 in 2020); significantly increased quality of higher education and the compatibility with European HE systems in order to occupy a worthy place in EHEA; building up a sustainable and effective link between higher education and the labour market, and achieved a dynamic compliance of demand and supply of specialists with higher education; expanded and strengthened network for

lifelong learning; broad application of the various electronic forms for distance learning. For achieving these objectives the following activities and measures are introduced: promoting university units for continuous, ongoing or post-graduate training, as well as career development centres; promoting the joint development of academic plans and programmes with the participation of business representatives and providing incentives for development of electronic forms for distance learning.

– **Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2015 – 2020** and Action plan. It is 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. Like the previous one, it also has specific objectives of the Strategy related to LLL are: ensuring quality and efficiency of VET through dual training, modular organization of vocational training, training of mentors for practical training in a real working environment; introducing „protected“ professions, providing accessible and high-quality career guidance services for students and adults; establishing a system for validating the knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning, activating the involvement of adults in training.

## 2.2. LLL policies

The stakeholders involved in the development, implementation and coordination of LLL policies include representatives at national, regional as well as at local level. At the national level the main actors are the Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, National Employment Agency, National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Health. The main social partners – the nationally representative employers’ and employees’ organizations are also involved in the development, and implementation of LLL policies. A third group is related to the NGO sector. At regional and local level the LLL policy is developed and implemented by the Regional Education Management; the Regional Development Council to the Regional governor; Rectors of universities and Academic Councils, school principals, head of various local non-profit organizations.

The particular institutions have contributed to the implementation of LLL policies and implement various initiatives and projects at regional and local level. LLL institutions in Bulgaria have a long history and traditions (Boyadjieva, 2012).

– **Evening schools.** According to the Law of National Education evening schools are opened for students above 16 years old. Some of these schools, in addition to evening teaching conducted education of adults in two shifts. There were two other forms in evening schools: extramural and individual (Boyadjieva, 2012: 42 – 3). The students who graduated from evening schools have the same rights as the graduates from the daily schools.

– Vocational education institutions

The Vocational Education and Training Act (Art. 9) defines different educational institutions which can provide adult vocational education - vocational schools, vocational high schools, vocational colleges, Centers for vocational training, Centers for qualification of trainees. Ministries, municipalities, employers' organizations, trade unions and single employers are also entitled to organize training for professional qualification. The Act envisages the following programmes for training of individuals older than 16 years (Art. 10): 1) 1 year Programmes A for initial vocational training for people who have completed at least 6<sup>th</sup>-grade; 2) 1 year Programmes B for initial vocational training for people who have completed either a secondary education grade or a full secondary education; 3) 4 or 5 year Programmes C for vocational education for people who have completed basic education; 4) 2 year Programmes D for vocational education for people who have completed secondary education; 5) Programmes E for continuing vocational training whose duration is stipulated with specific documents related to vocational education. The programmes A, B, C and D are specified for each profession and are harmonized with the state educational requirements for professional qualification (Art.13). The remaining programmes are specified with the documents related to vocational education.

**Centres for Vocational training** are part of the formal education system and they train of individuals older than 16 years. The training is aimed at acquiring, updating and improvement of qualification or re-qualification in a profession or part of profession under I, II and III degree of professional qualification. The number of active CVT continuously increasing, at the end of 2013 is 908 – by 2.40 percent more than in 2012. For a large number of unemployed, especially from disadvantaged groups inclusion in vocational training by VTC, is an opportunity for equal participation in the labor market, and for employees - to keep your workplace. Vocational training centers are licensed and coordinated by the National Agency for Vocational education and training (NAVET) established with the Vocational Education and Training Act. The state and the municipal vocational schools, the centers for vocational training and the centers for qualification of trainees are financed by the state budget, the municipalities, by international programmes.

– Non-formal Education

Non-formal education and training is provided by enterprises, community centers (chitalishta), NGOs, foreign cultural centers, private educational units (Boyadjieva, 2012: 53). The organizations conducting non-formal training can be very flexible in their form, content and means of education. Preferred forms of education are: seminars, short courses, lectures, club activities, consultations. The topics range from: acquiring basic computer literacy skills, using the Internet and various software products, language training to alternative agricultural production, etc. Most of the training courses are targeted at the employed: people with different

social status, occupation and income, but also at the unemployed, unqualified people or ones with low qualification, people at risk or disadvantaged groups. Non-formal education is directed towards helping people to acquire a profession and to prepare them for the labour market, and also towards increasing the social activity of the population in the new market conditions and the dynamically growing economy.

**The target groups of LLL policy** are the early leavers from education and training, ethnic minorities, and the unemployed. In recent years in Bulgaria the number of *school leavers* is still relatively high compared to the average numbers in other countries of the European Union. In a longer perspective, early school leavers bring about high economic costs. Their segment in Bulgaria is 12.9% in 2014 (EUROSTAT). The demographic crisis and rural–urban disparities further deepen segmentation. The shrinking population of Bulgaria (due to migration, decreasing number of births, ageing) has brought about serious issues related to unemployment, lower quality of life, insecurity and marginalization, which also assist the trend to drop out from the educational system over the last decades. The reason for dropout is the event of regular school absences and the subsequent low grades; as the share of minority children dropping out from school is disturbingly high in Bulgaria. The census of 2011 disclosed that 23.2% of Roma children (aged 7 – 15) are excluded from the schooling process. In the year 2013/2014, 17 794 pupils have dropped out from the mainstream educational system, as 30 % of them were up to 4<sup>th</sup> grade (ISCED 1), and 27.5 % – up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade (ISCED 2) (NSI, 2015)<sup>4</sup>. Early education leaving is interconnected with social and economic disadvantage and low educational background.

According to last census data (National Statistical Institute, Census, 2011<sup>3</sup>) the most unfavourable educational structure is this of the Roma ethnic minority. Similar portion of Roma have completed primary education (33.7%) and lower secondary education (37%). The share of Roma in higher education has continuously been below 0.5%, whereas the portion of Roma with upper secondary education has remained at 6.5%. The share of Roma, who declared illiterate or have lower than primary degree, estimates of 22.3% (Census 2011). The alarming facts (Census 2011) show that 11.8% of the Roma in the country reported themselves as illiterate<sup>5</sup>. Another multinational survey adds to the Census by describing the share of self-perceived illiterates among young Roma aged 16 – 24, which is 15% of all respondents (Doghi, 2012). The reason for illiteracy is the event of regular school absences and the subsequent dropout. Poverty and judgmental attitudes are considerable factors in the exceptionally low enrolment rates of minority children in pre-schooling that further exacerbate the impediments they face later at school. Besides, disadvantaged Roma families demonstrate weak interest in schooling and parental deficiency of educative style towards their children (Milenkova & Hristova, 2017).

LLL policy documents in Bulgarian conditions are few. For the past ten years from 2005-2015, three strategies have been adopted:

– *The National Strategy for Continuing Vocational Training (2005 – 2010)*, which aimed at optimization of the conditions for obtaining vocational qualification of the work force.

– *The National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2008–2013)* which envisaged measures for all educational degrees, including adult education, with respect to disadvantaged groups and people aged 55 +.

– *The National Strategy for Lifelong Learning for the period 2014 – 2020*, which has a leading role in providing the legal conditions for the implementation of LLL policies.

Target groups of the current Strategy are people 16+, low qualified, minority groups, unemployed, marginal groups, people who need re-qualification, people who need higher qualification. The Basic Principles of the Strategy: *quality* with the objective to transform LLL into a factor for the success and competitiveness of the citizenry, the institutions, and organizations; **equality and diversity with the objective** to ensure equal opportunities for all individual and collective stakeholders to participate in various and multiple forms of LLL; **decentralization aiming** to transfer of powers and resources from central government bodies to the regional administrations, the setups of social partners and NGO; **cooperation** at various levels; **measurability, aiming at the** enhancement of the opportunities for monitoring and measuring the education objectives; and **flexibility in order to increase the readiness** of the stakeholders to respond upon occurrence/ascertainment of unforeseen social processes, through expansion of the earmarked objectives and actions.

The key priorities set in the Strategy are: introducing innovations; improving the quality of education and training; ensuring equal access to lifelong learning, active social inclusion and active citizenship; and linking education and training to the needs of the economy and changes in the labor market. The objectives of the strategy are: building a coordinated national education and training system, which ensures diverse learning paths; introducing really operating lifelong learning instruments and their integration into a single system; promoting the participation in all forms of learning: formal education and training, non-formal and informal learning; reducing the number of illiterate young people aged 15 – 19 from 2.0% in 2011 to 1.5% in 2020, among those aged 20 – 24 – from 2.3% in 2011 to 1.5%; and among those aged 25 – 29 – from 2.3% in 2011 to 1.5% in 2020; reducing the share of early education leavers aged 18 – 24 from 12.5% in 2012 to less than 11% in 2020; increasing the share of those completing higher education aged 30 – 34 from 26.9% in 2012 to 36% in 2020; and increasing the participation of the population aged 25 – 64 in education and training from 1.5% in 2012 to more than 5% in 2020. The strategy envisages strengthening the role of universities as institutions for lifelong learning and encouraging potential trainees for further training in higher education as well as harmonization between offered by universities programs and demanded by the labor market qualifications.

– **Operational Program “Science and Education for Intelligent Growth” 2014 – 2020**, in compliance with the “Europe 2020” strategy set the objectives: to reduce the share of early education leavers by benefitting from the governmental budget and the structural funds; to ensure 1,5% of GDP invested in science and researches and that 36% of the population aged 30 – 34 to hold a higher education diploma. Despite of the current efforts, the share of Bulgarian citizens aged 30 – 34 who have completed higher education is 26.9% against 32.3% the EU average. In an era of technological and inclusive growth, unequal prospects for employability of young people further contribute to deprivation, social exclusion and poverty.

– **National Reform Program “Bulgaria 2020”** set the objective of reducing the share of early school leavers under 11% by benefitting from the governmental budget and the structural funds. In an era of technological and inclusive growth, unequal prospects for employability of young people further contribute to deprivation, social exclusion and poverty. Nowadays, the dynamics of social events and the rapid alteration of agendas have led to demand for more flexible and adept options for policy solutions in regard to educational inequality (with a focus on segregated ethnic communities), including the need for diversity of the commitments to be processed.

– **National Strategy for Reduction of Early School Leaving (2013 – 2020)** is aimed at achieving the target set in the National Reform Program “**Bulgaria 2020**”. The strategy is in line with the measures envisaged to improve access and quality of pre-school and school education. It insists upon developing three sets of policies: preventive, intervening and compensatory. The preventive policies include: providing positive educational environment, improving the quality of education by focusing on practical orientation; formation of an attitude to lifelong learning from an early age; ensuring access to quality education for children and students from ethnic communities and with special educational needs. The intervening policies are aimed at new approaches for working with parents, i.e. alternative parental meetings, active involvement in joint activities, enhancing parental participation in school boards; approval of the individual and group mentoring; career guidance, career pathways; work-based learning and development activities based on interests. In their turn the compensatory policies rely upon an active labor market policy and the introduction of specific measures for reintegration into the education system as using different forms of education such as distance, evening, extramural, correspondence; literacy courses contributing to social integration and inclusion in the labor market; learning in clubs, libraries, community centers, youth information and counseling centers, regional and local centers; creating opportunities for in-formal learning with validation; increasing opportunities for workplace learning, with an emphasis on opening more internships and apprenticeships and motivating local businesses for accepting trainees and apprentices; and building a national system of validation of competences acquired through non-formal training and/or informal learning.

– **National Strategy to promote and improve literacy skills (2014 – 2020)** has as its target groups: the entire population of all ages: children, students in early school age, adolescents, adults. The Strategy aims at creating a knowledge society in which literacy is central to individual and social development and is the basis for smart growth. Developed policies aimed at: conducting courses in literacy, information campaigns, validation of prior non-formal and informal learning. The Strategy entails overcoming the causes of low literacy among the vulnerable groups of the poor and that of the bilingual people (i.e. the Roma) where poverty and bad command of the official language serve as major barriers for acquiring diploma.

– **Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and students from ethnic minorities (2015 – 2020)** builds upon the previous documents approved in 2004 and 2010. It formulates the following strategic aims: ensuring complete socialization of children and students from ethnic minorities; ensuring equal access to quality education for children and students from ethnic minorities; promoting intercultural education and preserving and developing the cultural identity of children and students from ethnic minorities. The Strategy envisages the following activities: working with parents to ensure greater interest in and commitment; attracting young people with higher education from ethnic minorities as teachers; providing additional qualification of pedagogical specialists to work in a multicultural educational environment; conducting of extracurricular work, combined with the traditions of the various ethnic groups; support students from vulnerable ethnic communities for continued their education after compulsory school age, including higher education; and dissemination of good practices for preservation and promotion of cultural traditions of ethnic communities through modern technologies.

The policies presented at national level provide a solid basis for the development of education and LLL. It should be noted that they are targeted at all ages, with a special focus on vulnerable groups, given the need for their more intensive participation in educational pathways. National policies follow European legislation and programs and have full synergy within a set framework.

### **3. The Policies in Blagoevgrad Region**

The implementation of national policies at the regional level takes the form of various programs aimed at social inclusion of social actors through the intermediary of different institutions. The programs are aimed at making a smooth transition from the educational institution to the labor market in order to improve the life of young people and create conditions for their development.

There are analyzed several main programs carried out after 2013 in FR Blagoevgrad, conducted under the LLL policies for Young Adults and labor market.

#### LIFELONG LEARNING HUB – LLL-HUB (2013 – 2016)

The program was carried out under the leadership of the Regional Management of Education, and shows specific LLL activities for young adults. It brings together ten partners from eight European countries representing public authorities, civil society organizations, chambers of commerce and educational institutions. The LLL-Hub project aimed at fostering shared meaning about lifelong learning across Europe by encouraging cross-sectorial cooperation and dialogue about the European agenda at national and regional level. The project addressed the challenge of building a genuine partnership approach by setting up a multilateral network of actors. By doing so it aims to create a feeling of shared responsibility and ownership among relevant stakeholders on EU lifelong learning strategies. The project aimed to structure the transnational policy learning on European lifelong learning strategies based on genuine research and dialogue at regional, national and EU level.

#### UNIVERSITY STUDENTS TRAINING PRACTICES (2007 – 2013) (2014 – 2020)

This is another LLL policy practice conducted in Blagoevgrad functional region. The program is funded by the European Structural and Investments Funds under the “Science and Education for Smart Growth 2014 – 2020” Operational Program. It is open to all students registered in the Register of current and discontinued students and Ph.D. students. The policy conforms to the strategic objective of the Operational Program for improving the quality of education through gain practical experience and improvement of practical skills of university students in accordance with the needs of the labor market. The other significant objective is to facilitate the transition from educational institutions to the workplace and increase the successful realization of young people into the labor market as well as to increase the number of students who find a job immediately after graduation. This measure is important for Blagoevgrad region because it synthesizes the efforts and activities of both the university as a lifelong learning institution and the various training organizations - public and private, NGO sector, business, that are located at the regional and local level and which hold student practices in order to enhance the experience and skills of the participants in a particular environment. The program contributes to the effective functioning of the educational process at the university level and in organizations; it also contributes to the harmonization of regional environment to include more young adults in workflow and strengthening the relationship between education – work environment – labor market.

#### START IN THE CAREER

This is another program that is implemented in Blagoevgrad region. The main objective of the program is to be provided opportunities to acquire work experience

for unemployed young adults who have completed secondary or higher education in order to facilitate their transition between education and employment. “Start in the Carrier” project is aimed at young people under 29 years of age who have completed their education and no practical experience. Young people can apply for jobs under the program.

The program is implemented in two components:

– Component 1: Young adults up to 29 years without a professional experience in the specialty who have completed higher education and are registered in a Labor Office. They are employed for 9 months. Employers under Component 1 are public administrations – the central government departments, the district and municipal administrations.

– Component 2: Young adults up to 24 years who have completed their vocational education, with no work experience, and registered in the Labor Office. They are employed for 6 months. Employers under Component 2 are from the private sector.

#### YOUTH GUARANTEE

The National Youth Guarantee Policy is aimed at Young Adults for receiving a job offer, continuing education, apprenticeship or internship within 4 months of being out of work or leaving the formal education system. Funding is from the state budget and under European funds, according to the National Action Plans for Employment for the respective year.

The implementation of the program at regional level is connected with the National Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan (2014 – 2020) (NYGIP). The NYGIP provides for every young person aged 15 – 24 to receive a qualitative offer of: a) job; b) continuing of the education; c) apprenticeship and training within four months after becoming unemployed or leaving the system of formal education. In order for this to happen, the young people have to be registered with the regional Labor office. Each young person has an individual action plan prepared by the experts, presenting his full profile. This helps providing the adequate job, education or training offer.

The NYGIP was applied in various stages. In 2014, the priority was to provide a job or an educational opportunity for people with primary or lower education, since these comprise the largest group of the registered with the labor office people up to the age of 24. For those who have secondary education the efforts are directed in providing a first job or training for acquiring a professional qualification. The university graduates receive their first job offer. The NYGIP also cover young adults who do not study or work, and are not registered with the labor office. The activities include directing the young people towards local schools and local labor offices, as well as private institutions providing job opportunities.

#### **4. Field Work**

10 interviews with young adults participated in the presented programs were conducted in Blagoevgrad functional region (BFR):

- 4 interviews under the “Student Practice” program;
- 3 interviews with participants in “Start in the Carrier” program;
- 2 interviews under the “Youth Guarantee” program, 1 interview with participant in the “LLL-HUB” program.

8 interviews with experts worked in analysed programs were conducted in the BFR:

- 3 interviews under the “Student Practice” program;
- 3 interviews with experts in “Start in the Carrier” and “Youth Guarantee” programs,
- 2 interviews with experts in “LLL – HUB” program.

Based on the comparison between the shared opinions of young adults and experts participating in the programs implemented in BFR, the following summaries for the interaction between youth and experts can be made.

The first basic issue in the analysis is: how important is the active involvement of the young adults in the presented programs? The active involvement of the youth can be considered to the touchstone of the programs success. It can be said that the programs under consideration are open to young people to the high extent. In addition, for the promotion of the programs, the Employment Agency undertakes information campaigns and the Career Center at the South-West University promotes its project activities.

The programs discussed, and their participants, show one very positive attitude towards learning and education which can be listed as:

- The education is the most important factor for the success in the society;
- Each educational degree is crucial to develop personally as well as professional skills;
- Every skill has a positive influence even if it is not directly related to the job of the person;

Generally some of the interviews show the role of the civic position together with education as main factors for the success in the society.

Another moment in the analysis of the interaction between experts and young people is the link between education and the labor market; and in particular, the correlation between the taught study content in educational institutions and the demands of the labor market; or how formal education prepare young people for the employers’ requirements? What is the relationship between demand and supply of skills? Some of the interviews are underlined the existing gaps between theory and practice in Bulgarian education. In this sense, educational institutions should now seek to combine the growing demand for practical skills of students with updating the curricula.

Professionals (in the education and training system) need to find a balance between theory and practice to prepare the students with the tools that make them more adaptable to the labor market. Educational institutions are facing a very dynamic industry and the market that is changing. What employers are looking for is also changing. In addition, teachers and educational systems need to form new skills and abilities for professions which are still not widespread. Besides academic knowledge, nowadays employers look for qualities such as creativity and emotional intelligence, as well as analytical and problem resolving skills.

The discrepancies between institutions consist in the fact that universities do not always supervising the realization of students, they place emphasis on training. Companies that invest in training their employees are few. They prefer to hire qualified specialists; only 23% of companies in Bulgaria invest in the training of staff. That is why it is necessary more active link between the two types of institutions.

In this respect, the interaction of experts and young adults is expressed in emphasizing on:

- Activities that focus on transition from education to employment, such as: internships, open doors, apprenticeship;
- Encouraging companies to hire young people;
- Introducing dual training: when students are both studying and working.

In this context in the interviews carried out is underlined difficult economic situation in Blagoevgrad region, reducing the investments, contraction of the labor market, which hinders the realization of young people and finding a job. In some of the interviews, experts focus on the share of unemployed and vulnerable groups – ethnic minorities, single mothers, people with disabilities who need protection and support – is growing. Need to create Special programs for coping with problems.

In addition, the interaction between the positions expressed in the interviews of youth and experts is related to highlighting the importance and contribution of the projects carried out on a regional basis and in relation to each individual involved in the projects. Each of the projects carried out has contributed to the development of both professional skills and social qualities. Participants therefore show the importance of projects for young adults. These programs are crucial because they are related to providing employment, income, and hence a better quality of life. Increasing the employment is a key to reducing poverty and social exclusion; people feel more engaged in the social environment and as a part of it. The basic challenges for the youngest people in Blagoevgrad FR are to find a suitable work and information from a mentor or friend who supports young adults, which graduated university or vocational school, but who still do not have enough experience.

Key moment in interviews is the importance of soft skills. It is emphasized that:

- The young people must be brought up to be able to show responsibility, respect

to the workplace, as well as to show respect to the people with whom he/she works or studies;

- Every skill has a positive influence even if it is not directly related to the job;
- Young adult should be able to present yourself, your ideas, your visions;
- Should be able to communicate with people and to apply the Lifelong Learning as a way of life.

According to one of the respondents „the person has to be very proactive/enterprising. Initiation, curiosity, constant participation in a number of training sessions, increasing his/her knowledge in different fields, being able to present him/herself and to have the ability of presenting good practices so that the acquired competences in some way give the confidence that young adults can find and personal fulfilment and realization on national and regional level.“

A conclusion from the interviews is the implementation the good practices and European experience. The interviews indicated that it is not enough to describe the advantages of different practices that develop as part of the European experience, but also to apply in regional conditions as part of the educational and economic environment.

A very important moment in the unfolding the interviews of young adults and experts, is their point of view and the angle of reasoning. The fact that young adults appreciate conducted projects through their own life course. They think about family, friends, education and their surroundings. Significant others have a special place in youth explanations:

1) The role of the family in young adult's development – as financial and emotional support. Family background can also result in contextual differences that may affect achievement and success. The respondents themselves are good examples how parents and family become an extremely essential factor for youth development and future. All interviewed young people stressed the role of the family they lived in and that had a decisive impact on them and the choices they made.

2) Teachers and the educational environment and their impact and the formation of habits and abilities.

3) Friends and informal environment as a source of support and information.

4) Institution – emphasis on the formal side as organizing courses and carried out trainings.

What is important to them lies in the opportunities for development, participation in life, and finding a good environment to stimulate them.

Young adults emphasize their satisfaction with participating in the programs and that they can be trained in organization. It is important for them:

- To participate in the real practical environment;
- To entrust them with specific tasks and duties;
- To receive payment trough their participation in the program.

Some of the interviews with young females set the gender topic and the *role of a woman*: whether she wants to find a better and well paid job and she could have the ability to combine professional realization and motherhood. It turns out that gender and the role of motherhood and the relationship with the children remains an eternal theme and can become a problem for the young families and the professional choice of women. The basic question is: how the family and marriage itself might help or hinder the social mobility of its members. The topic of the parenting is a large one and includes things such as socialization of children, parental roles, etc. In the case of experts, the evaluation of projects is done through the contribution of the relevant project to the region and the institution. Reflection allows penetration into deeper community habitus that allow appreciation of utility in a more abstract and generalized form.

The programs review shows that there is an interaction between the assessments and perceptions of young adults and experts. In common evaluations, the similarity between shared views is indicative of the fact that ongoing programs in the functional region are estimated to be necessary in practice by both groups of respondents. This is not only indicative for the importance of programs, but also for their effectiveness in terms of perceiving the effect of programs and how to implement them. It can be said that this is indicative for the existence of interaction, as well as the search not only of interrelations between the two groups of social actors but also of providing a common cause to the implementation of the projects. Although starting from different positions to the programs concerned: young adults from the position of personal success and realization, and the experts - from the position of their management or leading position, included in the project expertise, it is noticed that there is a general focus on expectations and the evaluation of project activities, and therefore an indicator of successful outcomes.

Policies that have been studied in the Blagoevgrad region have European or national funding, as young adults are excluded from the LLL policy making process.

The programs studied represent a very good opportunity to include unemployed young people in the labor market as well as to gain practical experience through apprenticeship and internship programs.

The main problem lies in the fact that, after completing the internship, the organization or the company in which the traineeship is running recruits a few young people due to the lack of many jobs.

## **5. Emerging Issues**

The mapping of the policy documents in the country and region which have been focusing on LLL shows that it has become a significant policy concern. The overarching aim of these policy initiatives is to invest human and financial resources in guaranteeing equal access and high quality education to pupils from different 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.

A major step towards bringing education closer to the labor market is 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. Special attention is paid to promoting university units for continuous, ongoing or post-graduate training, career development centres as well as continuing the incentives for development of electronic forms for distance learning, that provide more mobile lifelong learning opportunities.

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 are 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.

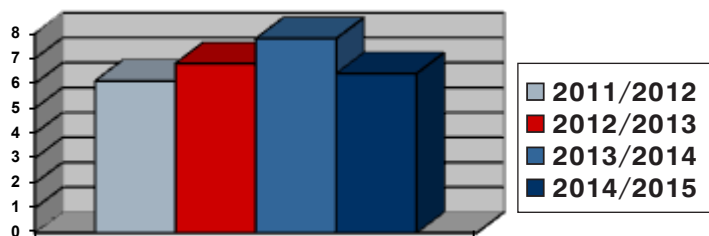
The LLL policies belong to three different sets, aiming at reducing dropout rate, enhancing social inclusion and competitiveness on the labour market of marginalized communities, encouraging pupils from disadvantaged families to continue their education, etc. These are preventive measures (such as improving 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 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. In this context, the European Social Fund (ESF) has been offering funds to various social actors (i.e. schools, universities, NGOs, municipalities) for launching and practising inclusive educational approaches. What they aspire is making the learning attractive to young people through initiating extracurricular activities (hobby clubs, etc.); establishment of intercultural learning environment; pre-qualification of teachers for working with bilingual technologies, and others.

In connection with the application of different good practices in a national context, it is necessary:

- Systematically developing and implementing lifelong learning policies;
- Promoting the benefits of LLL for learners of all ages;
- Developing effective mechanisms for cooperation between LLL participants at national, regional and local level;
- Improving the link between education and training as well as taking into account the needs of the labor market;
- Improving access to education and training;
- Increasing the motivation for learning of all groups;
- Diversification the forms of the offered training – remotely and electronically;
- Introduction of advanced technologies in teaching and learning in order to develop young adults, their interests, talents, creativity, etc.<sup>6)</sup>

There are significant results, but aggregated quantitative data indicate that the participation of the population in LLL is low: 1,8% 2014 (Labour force survey). Compared to the other EU countries Bulgaria's position has also deteriorated significantly according to data of Adult Education Surveys. The average for the EU (28) for 2014 was 10.7% (Labour force survey). During the period 2010/11 – 2014/15 school year the number of adult learners in formal education in Bulgaria ranges from 48,000 to about 60,000 with tentative growth and a significant reduction in 2015 academic year. The share of adult learners of the total number of students in formal education for the period also varies: by 6.0% for 2010/11 academic year reached 7.8% for 2013/14, subsequently decreased to 6.4% in 2014/15 school year (Fig.1). The most important reasons for this are the reluctance of employers to invest in long-term training of employees and low motivation of potential learners on their personal prosperity, which would achieve after completion of training.



**Figure 1.** Relative share (%) of adult learners in the total number of learners in formal education

Source: NSI

In summary it can be said that the basic conditions for the coordination of stakeholders at national level are created to implement the LLL policy. The tools for monitoring and evaluation of LLL policies are an essential condition for success, but

still have a limited character and have no influence on increasing the participation of the population in activities for lifelong learning (Boyadjieva, 2012a).

The legal and political macro framework at national level largely triggers proper educational outcomes; but sometimes, there is a lack of internal coherence between different levels of educational system. All this indicates that under Bulgarian conditions there are some problems associated with the practical implementation of policies and programs adopted at national and regional level relate to young adults.

It is necessary to develop the initiative of the regional and local structures, to increase the measures for the dual training and the activation of the vocational training and courses in both formal and non-formal learning. A very important moment is the emphasis of the role of business as a key factor for the development of LLL at national and regional level.

#### **NOTES**

1. <http://www.young-adullt.eu/>
2. The project is accepted understanding that these are young people aged 18-29 years.
3. <http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2011final.pdf>
4. Early school leavers in Bulgarian educational system by reasons and grade. NSI: <http://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/3435/%D1%83%D1%87%D0%B0%D1%89%D0%B8->
5. <http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Census2011final.pdf>
6. <http://www.lll-hub.eu/country/bulgaria/>

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