https://doi.org/10.53656/str2025-6-5-the

Research Results
Резултати от научни изследвания

THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR THE PROFESSIONAL REALIZATION OF STUDENTS – PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Dr. Anny Atanasova, Chief Assist. Prof.,
Dr. Viktoriya Kalaydzhieva, Chief Assist. Prof.,
Dr. Radostina Yuleva-Chuchulayna, Chief Assist. Prof.,
Dr. Kalina Durova-Angelova, Chief Assist. Prof.
South-West University „Neofit Rilski“

Abstract. Higher education is constantly evolving in parallel with societal transformations. This study examines the role of higher education for the professional realization of students through the dialectical unification of theoretical and practical knowledge. The aim is to outline the main problems and prospects in this area, as well as to propose possible measures for effectively addressing the identified challenges. The methodological preparation for creating the article is based on the observation, collection, and analysis of information materials from reports, strategies, as well as additional scientific materials to support the theoretical concept of the topic. Empirical research has also been conducted through questionnaires, and statistical methods have been used to process and analyse the results obtained. The results of the study emphasize the key role of higher education for the professional realization of students. The data show that students perceive the university not only as a place for acquiring knowledge but also as a means for future professional development. High levels of satisfaction with the specialties, material base, and teaching, as well as the willingness to recommend the programs, show students' confidence in the educational process. Although a significant share of students remains unemployed, there is a clear desire for a practical orientation and integration into the labour market. This highlights the need for higher education to strengthen the connection with the real work environment through internships, practical projects and mentoring initiatives that further increase students‘ confidence and preparedness for a successful career.

Keywords: higher education; professional realization; higher education institutions; practical training.

Introduction

Choosing a career direction after graduating from higher education is a key moment in the professional development of young people. The possibility of

successful realization after graduation is among the leading factors that shape the choice of higher education institution, specialty, and professional direction. Higher education plays a significant role in building human capital by providing knowledge, skills and forming work attitudes in young people. In the conditions of a dynamic labor market, digitalization and global competition, the expectations for universities are to prepare not only specialists with theoretical knowledge, but also flexible, adaptable individuals, able to meet the needs of the modern economy. Along with education, several additional factors influence career choice. Opportunities for realization in the labor market depend both on personal qualities and acquired abilities, as well as on a number of external factors. Personal aspects include a desire to accumulate knowledge and practical skills, motivation for development, readiness, and capacity for work, which are formed in the family, during university studies, and through practical experience. On the part of the educational institution, the contribution is expressed in the development of abilities and work skills through bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, with the level of mastery of the provided knowledge and skills remaining the personal responsibility of each student. Other factors influencing the professional realization of graduates are the organization and management of the educational process, the content of curricula and programs and their compliance with current labor market requirements, the commitment of teachers.

This article aims to analyze the role of higher education in the professional realization of students, focusing on existing problems and possible prospects for improvement. The professional realization of graduates has become a leading indicator of the effectiveness of higher education, with universities in Bulgaria facing the complex task of preparing personnel who can successfully adapt to both the rapidly changing local economy and the unstable global environment. Positive trends are observed in Bulgaria regarding the employment of graduates; however, challenges remain related to mismatches between the skills acquired and employer requirements.

Literature Review

The problems and challenges facing higher education in Bulgaria highlight the need to increase the degree of correspondence between education and labor market needs by creating closer cooperation between educational institutions, employers, and scientific institutions (Mineva-Dimitrova 2019). In turn, Todorova et al. (2022) emphasize that the higher education system in the Republic of Bulgaria operates with a high degree of sustainability, but is built and concentrated in a few main centers.

Regional disparities and the need for a skilled workforce should be addressed by supporting the flexibility of the education and training system (Todorova et al. 2022). Stimulating higher education at a regional level will improve the demand and

supply of professions and qualifications on the labor market, in accordance with the level of development of the regional economy and the stated investment intentions (Filipova & Usheva 2021). Higher education should foster the competencies and opportunities that enable young people to realise their potential. According to Todorova et al. (2022), this can be achieved by optimizing the decentralization process, which should be placed at the basis of the territorial structure of higher education.

Increasing institutional, administrative, and expert capacity within the Bulgarian state is a key factor in the development of individual regions (Todorova et al. 2022). Attracting and retaining high-quality personnel with higher education in municipalities will ensure the targeted allocation of investments to Bulgarian municipalities. And this policy, in turn, will lead to the transformation of municipalities into places with a concentration of highly educated people. This capacity will enable the formation of a critical mass of well-educated personnel and a network of effective units and institutions to support municipalities. This should be a priority for the state, implemented through effective policies for higher education, which will have a significant, long-term positive effect.

Another important aspect is that the higher education system should be linked to secondary education (Todorova et al. 2022). Educating and qualifying those parts of society with low incomes and limited education will enable the educational service to reach a wider segment of the population. On the other hand, this also means a more targeted role and allocation of financial resources by the state to make education a national priority.

For her part, Neycheva (2020) examines the impact of digitalization on the degree of mismatch between education and employers‘ requirements. Analyzing the determinants of the vertical mismatch in the qualifications of workers, she emphasizes the role of technological changes affecting jobs. There is a demand for a workforce with high skills, which increases the requirements for acquired skills and the qualifications of trainers, ensuring wider access to education and a more equitable distribution by field of study. The empirical analysis of Neycheva (2020) confirms the hypothesis that those employed in the ICT sector are more likely to be hired in positions corresponding to their educational level. The assumptions that women are at higher risk of over-education are also confirmed. Another significant factor is employment in the field of trade and sales. On the other hand, the larger share of micro and small enterprises is negatively correlated with the degree of qualification mismatch.

In the context of the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021 – 2030, the main tasks for addressing the rapidly changing dynamics of the labor market are outlined and actions are envisaged to achieve the set goals. The document emphasizes the need for science, education, research and innovation to be directed towards solving the economic,

environmental and social problems of society. The conditions and procedures for determining state-subsidised admission have been significantly changed, reducing admission to professional fields whose number of students has grown disproportionately to the development of the entire system and the needs of the labour market. Priority professional fields and protected specialties receive greater opportunities for admission and targeted funding due to the identified deficits of qualified personnel.

At the same time, although the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021 – 2030 (2021, p. 8) insists that the rating system for higher education institutions has been improved and provides annually up-to-date and rich information on the status of each professional field in each higher education institution, it is necessary to consider the fact that the indicators do not take into account many aspects that would make them more objective and valuable for society and business (Nozharov 2024).

Based on the detailed review and analysis of the strategy for the current programming period, Terziev et al. (2021) add that to transform education into an intelligent tool for economic development, it is necessary to look at the following main directions: 1. regionalization of secondary education, consistent with the priority development areas; 2. technical and technological focus, corresponding to the nature of the economy; 3. degree of interactivity and digitalization, ensuring the operational management of technological and economic processes with sufficient interaction with economic entities; 4. a new model for the development of higher education, providing a basis for the development of science and a basis for accelerated innovative economic development; 5. rethinking the legislative basis for autonomy, accreditation and the creation of rating systems with a view to balanced management, control over resources and development of the academic potential.

Discussion and Analysis of the Problems and Prospects Related to the Professional Realization of Graduates.

The professional realization of graduating students is of essential importance both for their personal development and for the economic and social progress of society. In the context of a dynamic labour market, with increasing requirements for qualifications and rapidly changing technologies, the transition from education to employment poses a challenge for many young people. The present discussion aims to outline the main problems that graduates face in finding professional realization, as well as to examine the opportunities and prospects for successful integration into the labor environment.

Table 1. Problems and prospects regarding the professional realization of the students

Problems related to the professional realization of the graduates	Prospects for improving professional realization through higher education
Mismatch between education and the labor market	Improving cooperation between universities and business
Insufficient practical training	Updating curricula
Low motivation for continuing education	Promoting continuing education
Vertical and horizontal discrepancy	Development of dual training
	Development of soft and hard "S" among the students

Source: Systematization of the authors

One of the most significant problems related to the professional realization of students is the discrepancy between academic training and the real needs of the labor market. According to the Institute for Market Economics (2025), empirical data on the state of professional qualifications, the profile of the studied specialties and the dynamics of labor force needs confirm the importance of vocational education as a strategic factor in the labor market. Despite this role, the vocational training system fails to fully fulfill its primary function - to ensure effective correspondence between the demand and supply of qualified personnel. Even more worrying is the persistent trend towards training in professional areas that do not align with the current requirements of the labour market, resulting in a discrepancy between the educational product and real economic needs. This imbalance raises questions about the adaptability of educational policies to modern socio-economic challenges. One of the possible directions for addressing this problem is to strengthen cooperation between universities and business. This could be achieved through joint internship programs, updating curricula according to market needs and involving employers in the educational process. This will create a better connection between theory and practice, which in turn will facilitate the integration of young specialists into the working environment. The second obstacle to the professional realization of students is the lack or shortage of practical training in universities. This in turn makes it difficult to make a smooth transition from the academic environment to professional realization. The inclusion of business representatives in the preparation of curricula ensures that training will be in sync with the real needs of the labor market. By creating incubators, hubs and providing mentoring and resources, students can acquire practical skills, creating their own projects and even business ventures during

their studies. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning have sparked international debates about the primary focus of education on cognitive skills and the academic curriculum in preparing students for their future careers (Elliott 2017; Brown & Keep 2018). Some authors argue that students at less prestigious higher education institutions receive a watered-down university education in subjects that have little value in the labour market (Caplan 2018). Next comes the low motivation of graduates to continue their education. According to data from the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021 – 2030, the lifelong learning system remains underdeveloped, despite the measures implemented during the first programming period from 2014 to 2020. Bulgaria remains in one of the last places in terms of learners in the age range 29 – 65 with only 3.5% of students compared to an average of 7.5% for the EU (2021, p. 7). There are several ways to improve this area, for example, universities can develop flexible forms of training – online, evening or weekend courses – that allow graduates to combine work and education. Short-term courses and specializations recognized by employers motivate young specialists to develop in specific areas that are in demand on the market. Former students who have successfully advanced their careers through continuing education can inspire new graduates through personal example and the sharing of their experiences. Lastly, there is the so-called vertical and horizontal mismatch. Many graduates occupy positions that do not require higher education. This results in the ineffective use of the acquired knowledge and skills. Ilieva-Trichkova (2014) notes that a significant percentage of graduates' work in positions that do not require higher education or in positions that are in a completely different field from the completed specialty. This leads to the so-called vertical and horizontal mismatches, resulting from the lack of career guidance and the disconnect between the education system and the business sector. The expansion of dual training, which combines theoretical training with practical work, can improve the match between education and labor market needs. A study by CEDEFOP (2023) highlights the importance of dual forms of training, which combine academic knowledge with real work and a shorter transition from university to the workplace.

For the study, it is necessary to pay attention to the development of soft and hard S among students, which will be of great benefit for their professional development. Higher education should provide not only academic knowledge, but also opportunities for personal and professional growth. Only in this way will students be competitive and adaptable to the future of work. Sharing the opinion of Wats & Wats (2009), hard skills are academic skills, experience and level of expertise, while soft skills are self-developed, interactive, communication, human and transferable skills. The literature suggests that hard skills contribute to only 15% of success, while the remaining 85% is achieved by soft skills. Employers are looking for young professionals who combine

hard skills – related to specific knowledge and technical competencies, with soft skills – personal and interpersonal qualities that reflect the ability to work effectively in a team and adapt to changing conditions. Hard skills are measurable abilities that are usually acquired through formal education, specialized courses or professional experience. Some authors believe that soft skills, when combined with hard skills, have a positive and significant impact on the innovative abilities of employees, both directly and indirectly (Romanenko, Stepanova, & Maksimenko 2024). They include computer literacy and work, some specific software, programming and digital technologies (mastery of languages such as Python, Java, HTML/CSS, etc.), financial and economic analysis, accounting operations, physical, engineering and laboratory skills in technical specialties, as well as proficiency in English, German, French, etc. at a professional level.

These skills are the basis for performing specific work tasks and are often a prerequisite for a given position. Soft skills are related to personal qualities and the ability to interact with people. They are not studied formally, but can be developed through targeted training and practice. The most sought-after skills by employers are communication, teamwork, critical thinking, adaptability, organization, as well as leadership skills. Universities and students should work together to develop a full professional profile. This can be achieved through project-based learning and real-life case studies, internships and practical classes in partner organizations, as well as participation in volunteer activities, events and student clubs, courses in communication, emotional intelligence and leadership, training through simulations and role-playing games, as well as online training and certification programs for current digital competencies.

Analysis

In today‘s dynamic economic environment, where the demands on young professionals are constantly changing, it is crucial to understand how well educational preparation meets the needs of the labor market. The study aims to determine how well graduating students feel prepared for a professional start, in what sectors and positions they see their future fulfillment, and what obstacles or opportunities they identify before them.

For the purposes of the study, three surveys were conducted in March and April 2025 among students from the Faculty of Economics at the South-West University “Neofit Rilski” from three main professional fields. (See Tab. 2) The questionnaire is completely anonymous and 310 respondents participated in the survey. The purpose of the study is to investigate and analyze the prospects for professional realization of graduating students.

The students participating in the survey are distributed by number into three main professional fields (PF) within the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, as follows:

– PF 3.7. Administration and management – 72 participants,
– PF 3.8. Economics – 159 participants and
– PF 3.9. Tourism – 79 participants.

The data in Table 2 clearly show that the largest number of participants is from the PF 3.8. Economics. They represent a significant part of the sample – over 50% of all participants. This can be interpreted as an indicator of higher interest in this field or a larger number of students studying in it, as well as from the perspective of the number of specialities within the field. The professional field 3.9. Tourism, follows with 79 respondents (26%), which is relatively evenly distributed compared to PF 3.7. Administration and management with 23% (72 respondents). The difference between them is minimal, suggesting that interest in these fields is similar. This information is crucial in interpreting future survey results, as it provides context for the relationship between different academic fields and enables a more accurate comparative analysis of the expectations and opportunities for professional realisation among students in individual fields.

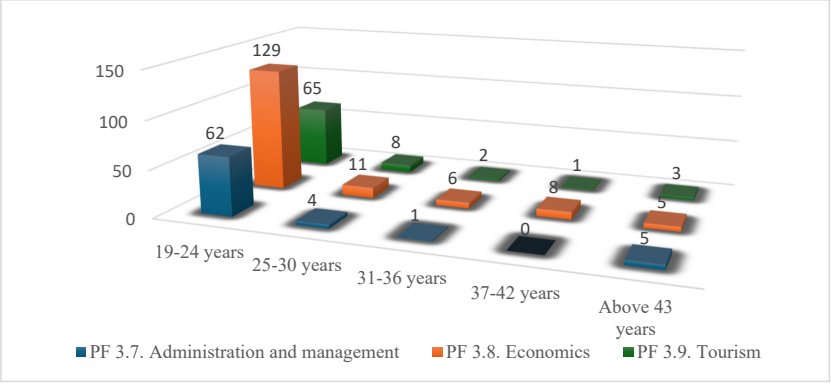
Table 2. Majors studied by students participating in the survey

PROFESSIONAL FIELD	SPECIALTY	RESPONDENTS, NUMBER	RELATIVE SHARE (%)
Professional Field 3.7. Administration and management	Business Management and Entrepreneurship	65	90.3
	Business Administration	1	1.4
	Corporate management	no	-
	Project management	no	-
	Business Management and Marketing	5	6.9
	Human resource management in business	no	-
	Economics and Management (Industry)	1	1.4
	Economics and Management (Entrepreneurship)	no	-
	Total number / relative share of all respondents (%)	**72**	**23.2**

Professional Field 3.8. Economics	Business Marketing and Advertising	45	28.3
	Accounting and control	35	22
	Finance	34	21.4
	International business	18	11.3
	Public Sector Economics	13	8.2
	Accounting and financial management	8	5
	Logistics	1	0.6
	Digital Finance (FINTECH)	1	0.6
	Digital Marketing	1	0.6
	Audit	1	0.6
	Finance, money circulation, credit and insurance	2	1.3
	Organization and management outside the sphere of material production (socio-cultural sphere)	no	-
	Total number / relative share of all respondents (%)	**159**	**51.3**
Professional Field 3.9. Tourism	Tourism	69	87.3
	Sustainable tourism	3	3.8
	Sustainable tourism management	no	-
	Event management	1	1.3
	Hotel and restaurant management	5	6.3
	Innovation and entrepreneurship in tourism	1	1.3
	Travel agency management	no	-
	Tourism Economics and Management	no	-
	Total number / relative share of all respondents (%)	**79**	**25.5**

Source: Authors‘ study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic “Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University “Neofit Rilski”

Chart 1. Age group of surveyed respondents (in num.)



Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

The age structure of the respondents (Chart 1) shows a clear distinction, with a dominant number of students falling within the 19 – 24 year interval (82.5%). PF 3.7. Administration and Management – 62 out of a total of 72 participants (≈86%), PF 3.8. Economics – 129 out of 159 participants (≈81%) and PF 3.9. Tourism – 65 out of 79 participants (≈82%). The most significant visible presence of more mature participants is in PF 3.8. Economics, where 11 respondents fall within the interval of 25 – 30 years and 8 respondents within the interval of 37 – 42 years. This suggests that the study of economics also attracts students with completed secondary or higher education who continue their development or retrain. The analysis of the results shows that in all three areas there are respondents over 43 years old. This fact is an indicator of the importance of higher education in later stages of life, such as continuing education or professional retraining. The assessment of the motivation, needs and career goals of different age groups creates prerequisites for adapting the educational process to the diversity of the student contingent.

On the other hand, a mixed-age profile presents an opportunity for the exchange of experiences and perspectives between younger and older students. Organizing group projects, workshops and discussions can enrich the learning process and create more sustainable professional networks. To facilitate access to educational opportunities for older applicants, it is crucial to conduct an active information campaign and optimize the application and enrollment process, especially in a digital environment. Diversity in age groups implies different life and professional experiences. It is necessary to offer personalized career counseling and mentoring programs to accompany students in choosing and achieving career goals.

Table 3. Distribution by gender

Professional Field (PF)	Gender				Total number
	Man	*Relative share for PF (%)*	*Woman*	*Relative share for PF (%)*	
3.7. Administration and management	36	50	36	50	***72***
3.8. Economics	46	29	113	71	***159***
3.9. Tourism	30	38	49	62	***79***
Total number	***112***	-	***198***	-	***310***

Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

The results of the analysis of the respondents (table 3) show a predominant number of women. In the professional field of Economics, 71% of the respondents are female, and 62% – in the professional field of Tourism. In PF 3.7. Administration and Management, equality between the two sexes is seen. Women have traditionally been encouraged to pursue education as a way of personal development and social mobility. In modern society, there is an increased participation of women in the educational system, as they are often brought up with the idea that education is the key to independence and professional success. With the increase in gender equality, more and more women are seeking career fulfillment outside of traditional roles, and university education is perceived as a path to this goal. On the other hand, in some regions, men are more often oriented towards earlier employment, either in Bulgaria or abroad, or towards professions that do not require higher education. This also results in a lower proportion of men in universities.

Table 4. Form of education of the surveyed students

Professional Field (PF)	Form of training				Total number
	Regular	*Relative share for PF (%)*	*Correspondence*	*Relative share for PF (%)*	
3.7. Administration and management	60	83	12	17	***72***

3.8. Economics	148	93	11	7	***159***
3.9. Tourism	74	94	5	6	***79***
Total number	***282***	-	***28***	-	***310***

Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

From Table 4 it can be concluded that the majority of responses in all three professional fields are from full-time students. For PF 3.7. Administration and Management, nearly 60 students are in full-time education, i.e. 83%. For PF 3.8. Economics, 148 responses from full-time students were registered, and respectively the values for PF 3.9. Tourism - 74 respondents in full-time education. Full-time students tend to be the most active participants in surveys conducted within the higher education institution. The main reason for this is their more frequent physical and digital engagement with the learning process, which makes them more accessible for the participation. They regularly attend lectures, seminars and other university events, where surveys are most often distributed. Additionally, full-time students are better informed about the university's current initiatives and can more easily fulfil academic requirements related to participation in surveys. This higher level of activity is often due to their stronger relationships with teachers, who encourage their participation with a view to improving the learning and administrative environment.

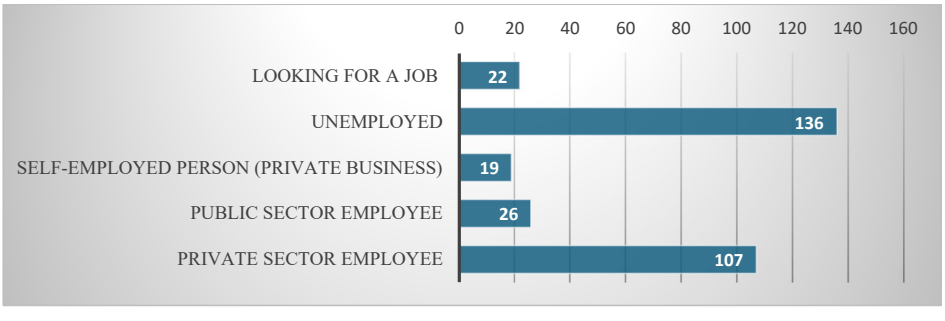
Table 5. Educational and scientific level of respondents

Professional Field (PF)	Educational and scientific degree						Total number
	Bachelor	*Relative share for PF (%)*	*Master*	*Relative share for PF (%)*	Doctoral degree	*Relative share for PF (%)*	
3.7. Administration and management	65	90.3	6	8.3	1	1.4	***72***
3.8. Economics	140	88.1	18	11.3	1	0.6	***159***
3.9. Tourism	72	91.1	7	8.9	0	0	***79***
Total number	***277***	-	***31***	-	***2***	-	***310***

Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

For the three professional fields, the most numerous are students in the educational and scientific degree "Bachelor" (table 5). For PF 3.7. Administration and Management there are 65 students in Bachelor, for PF 3.8. Economics there are 140 students in Bachelor and for PF 3.9. Tourism there are 72 respondents. The participating masters are 6, 7 and 18 students respectively. There is only 1 registered answer for "doctoral degree" in PF. 3.7. Administration and Management and 1 for PF 3.8. Economics.

Chart 2. Current professional status of all respondents (in num.)



Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

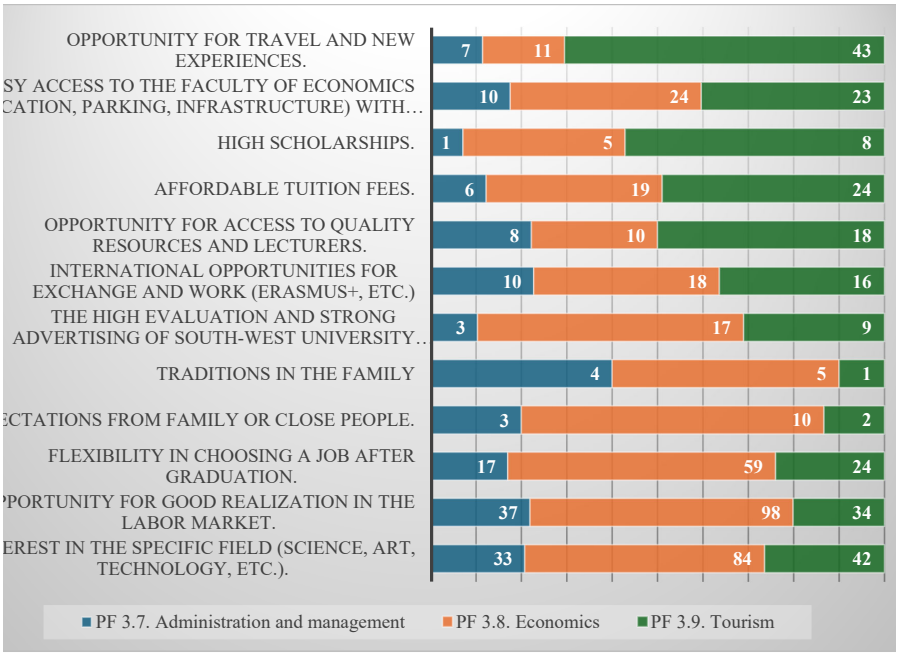
Table 6. Current professional status of students separately for the fields (in num.)

Current professional status of students (in %)	Professional Field (PF)		
	3.7. Administration and management	*3.8. Economics*	*3.9. Tourism*
Looking for a job	4	7	10
Unemployed	46	43	44
Self-employed person (private business)	10	5	5
Public sector employee	8	9	8
Private sector employee	32	36	33

Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

Significant and essential conclusions about the professional realisation of students from the Faculty of Economics are outlined in the analysis of their current professional status (Chart 2 and Table 6), as well as in the following survey results. The data clearly show a significant presence of students who are currently unemployed (over 40% for all three areas; PF 3.7. Administration and Management – 45.80%, PF 3.8. Economics – 42.80% and PF 3.9. Tourism – 44.30%), and this fact is based on the idea of complete immersion of the respondents in academic life. In addition to them, there are active job seekers, who make up another 10% of the representative sample of the Faculty of Economics at the South-West University "N. Rilski". The increased job search among tourism students suggests the need for more structured career guidance programs and cooperation with employers in the sector. However, the results show that half of the respondents focus their main attention on the learning process. Of interest is the distribution of working students across three areas: employees in the private and public sectors, as well as self-employed individuals with their own businesses. Students from PF 3.8. Economics (36.50%) are most actively integrated into private business, probably due to the greater number of opportunities for internships and work in commercial, accounting and financial structures. The highest share of self-employed individuals is observed in PF 3.7. Administration and Management (9.70%), which may reflect entrepreneurial attitudes among students. In other areas, the share is lower – about 5%, which suggests an increase in training for starting one's own business and classes for entrepreneurs.

Chart 3. Motivation for choosing the major studied by students (in num.)



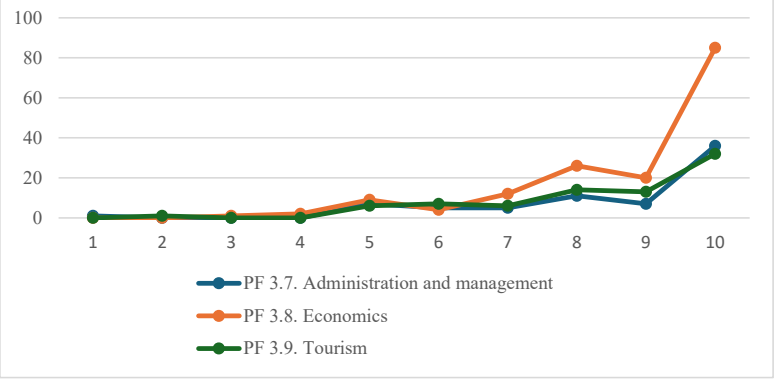
Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

Note:* the question had the possibility of multiple answers

The factors shaping the attitude of young people towards a desired higher education institution, specialty and professional field are most often related to the possibility of successful implementation in the real economics (Chart 3). In this regard, the most potent motivator and leading reason for choosing education has the highest share in PF 3.8. Economics (98 respondents), followed by PF 3.7. Administration and Management (37) and PF 3.9. Tourism (34). Interest in the specific field for all respondents is a key moment in their professional development. This is also a main indicator of internal motivation and conscious choice. PF 3.8. Economics again leads with 84 respondents, but also in PF 3.9. Tourism (42) and PF 3.7. Administration and Management (33) interest in the content of the specialty plays an important role. Flexibility in choosing a job has a significant number of responses in PF 3.8. Economics (59), moderate in PF 39. Tourism (24) and lower in PF 3.7. Administration and Management (17). This reflects a perception of broader opportunities for realization in economic specialties. The influence of

family and traditions has relatively low values in all three areas. It is least important for Tourism, where personal motivation dominates. The opportunity to travel and experience new things is the dominant reason for choosing Tourism (43), which is logical, given the nature of the speciality. The results indicate that the opportunity for professional realization and interest in the specific specialty are the main factors for choosing a major for all students.

Chart 4. Importance for the professional realization of showing diligence in the learning process for the surveyed students (in num.)



Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

Note: scale from 1 – extremely unimportant to 10 – extremely important

From the data in Chart 4, the following summary assessments can be made for the three professional areas:

– The grade for PF 3.7. Administration and Management is 8.50

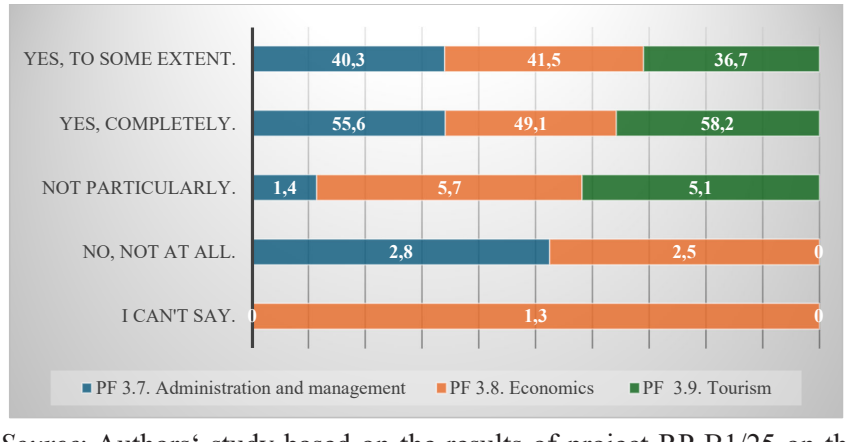
– The grade for PF 3.8. Economics is 8.82

– The grade for PF 3.9. Tourism is 8.42

These values show that students consider diligence to be a key factor in achieving professional success, PF 3.7. Administration and Management – 11 (score 8) + 7 (score 9) + 36 (score 10) = 54 responses = 75% of respondents. PF 3.8. Economics: 26 + 20 + 85 = 131 responses = 82% of respondents. PF 3.9. Tourism: 14 + 13 + 32 = 59 responses = 75% of respondents in the three areas, a clearly expressed belief is observed that engagement in the learning process is directly related to future realization. The highest score is among students in Economics. Medium degree of importance (scores 5–7), respectively for PF 3.7. Administration and Management: 7 (score 5) + 5 (score 6) + 5 (score 7) =

17 answers, for PF 3.8. Economics: 9 + 4 + 12 = 25 answers and for PF 3.9. Tourism: 6 + 7 + 6 = 19 answers A significant part of the students perceive diligence as important, but not decisive. Low degree of importance (scores 1 – 4), there are the following registered data, PF 3.7. Administration and Management: 1 (score 1), for PF 3.8. Economics: 0 (score 1), 0 (score 2), 1 (score 3), 2 (score 4) and finally for PF 3.9. Tourism: 0 (score 1), 1 (score 2). Almost absent negative attitudes. This confirms that students rarely underestimate the importance of academic engagement for their future career. The results clearly show that the majority of students in the three professional fields perceive diligence in the learning process as critically important for their professional realization. This is especially clearly observed among students in Economics, where over 80% gave grades of 8, 9 or 10. This can be attributed to the more competitive environment and higher professional requirements in the economic sector. The fact that the answers with low values on the scale are single is an extremely positive signal for the academic motivation of the students and for the way in which they perceive the connection between education and career.

Chart 5. Respondents‘ assessment of created knowledge, experience, skills and competencies useful for the professional realization of students (in %)

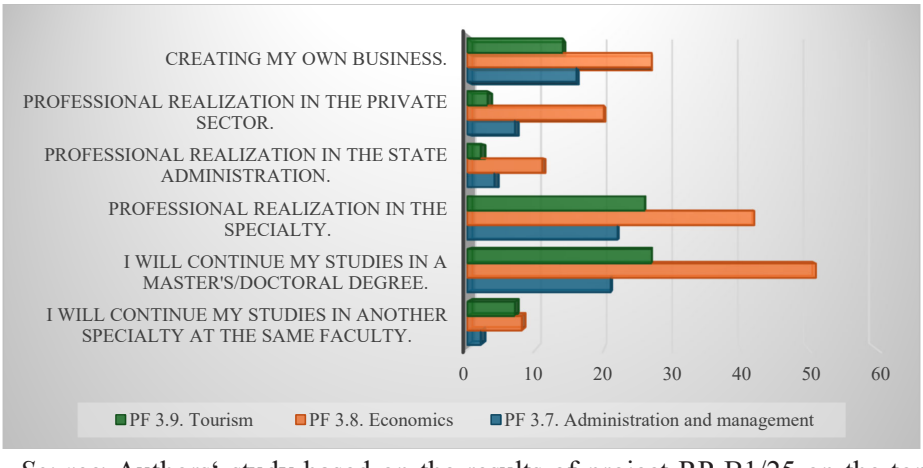


Source: Authors‘ study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic “Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University “Neofit Rilski”

Chart 5 shows the assessment of the surveyed students regarding the knowledge, skills, and competencies created during their studies, which are useful for their professional realization. Positive values are observed for all three professional areas. The answer “yes, completely” was indicated by 51% (about 40) of the

respondents for PF 3.9. Tourism, for PF 3.8. Economics there are 42% (67) of the respondents and, respectively, for PF 3.7. Administration and Management there are 40% (29) respondents. For the answer "yes, to some extent", the results are minimally different. It is important to emphasize that for PF 3.7. Administration and Management and PF 3.9. Tourism there is no registered data for the answer "no, not at all", i.e. there are no negative answers to the question posed. For PF 3.8. Economics there are 5 negative registered answers among the respondents.

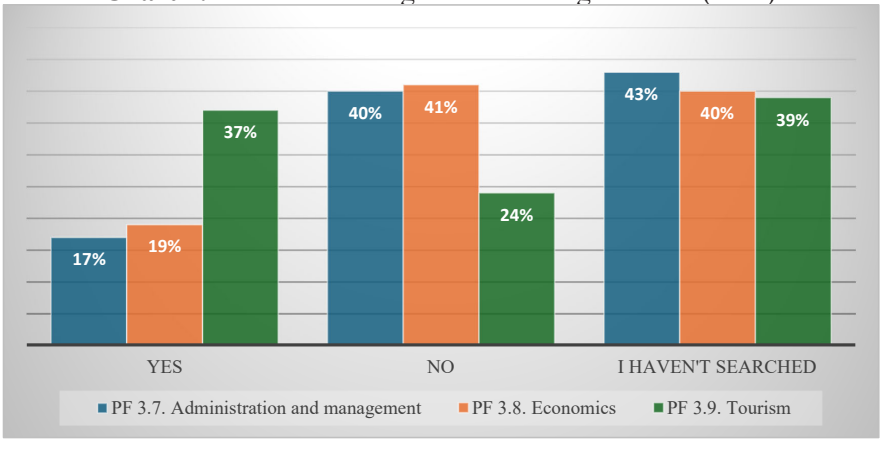
Chart 6. Expectations after completing the training among the surveyed students (in num.)



Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

The data in chart 6 reveal clearly emerging trends: students in the specialties of PF 3.8. Economics are oriented to the greatest extent towards continuing their education, as well as towards broad opportunities for realization - in the private, public sector and entrepreneurship. Among students in PF 3.7. Administration and Management, a desire for realization in the specialty and their own business stands out, while in PF 3.9. Tourism students also show interest in continuing their education, but are less oriented towards the classic employment sectors. The overall picture shows that the majority of students have clear and realistic expectations for their future, and there is also a strong entrepreneurial spirit in all areas.

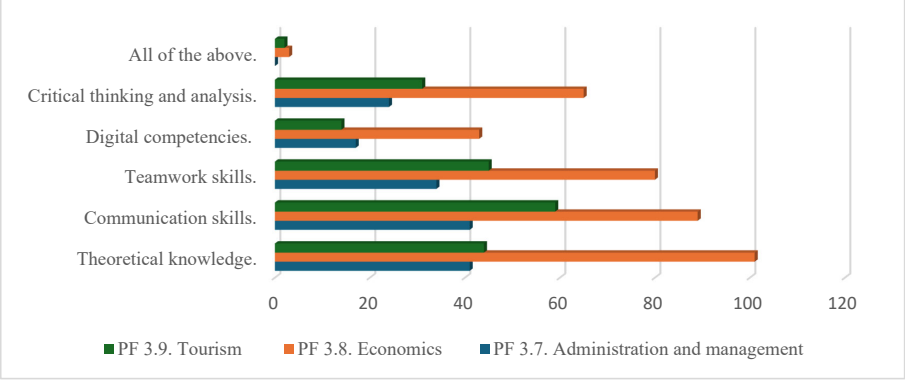
Chart 7. Job found during studies among students (in %)



Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

The data in chart 7 shows whether students were able to find a job during their studies. The highest response rates are for "I have not looked for a job", as most students prefer to successfully complete their education and then enter the labor market. This shows a clear priority for academic goals and a desire for a quality graduation, without distraction from work commitments. At the same time, some respondents reported that they still worked during their studies, which indicates the presence of flexibility, independence and a desire to gain practical experience. This can include both work in the specialty and temporary or part-time employment for the purpose of financial support. This balance between study and work activity highlights the differences in personal motivation and circumstances among students, but overall indicates that education remains a leading priority for the majority of them. The data can also be used as a basis for developing strategies to promote internship programs that do not interfere with the learning process, but at the same time prepare students better for their future realization.

Chart 8. Knowledge, skills, experience and competencies acquired during training, useful for professional realization among respondents (in num.)



Source: Authors' study based on the results of project RP-B1/25 on the topic "Research on the professional opportunities for students graduating from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

Note*: the question suggested multiple answers

The following data are established from Chart 8:

– Theoretical knowledge – most highly rated by students from PF 3.8. Economics – 101 respondents, followed by PF 3.9. Tourism (44) and PF 3.7. Administration and Management (41). This shows that economic education has a stronger theoretical core and that students recognize it as a valuable resource for professional realization.

– Communication skills – very highly rated by all three areas, as follows PF 3.8. Economics - 89, then PF 3.9. Tourism – 59, as well as PF 3.7. Administration and Management – 41. This emphasizes that the ability to communicate effectively is perceived as essential for professional success regardless of the chosen specialty.

– Teamwork skills – have the following high values. Students from the specialties in PF 3.8. Economics – 80, followed by students in PF 3.9. Tourism – 45, and finally from PF 3.7. Administration and Management – 34. Teamwork is a key competence, especially in economic and tourism contexts, where cooperation is a daily requirement.

– Digital competencies – significantly lower values, as for PF 3.8. Economics there are 43, for PF 3.7. Administration and Management 17 responses were registered, and for PF 3.9. Tourism – 14. The data show that either students do not perceive digital skills as sufficiently represented in the training, or they do not directly connect them with their realization. This is a signal of the need for stronger integration of digital technologies in the learning process.

– Critical thinking and analysis – most pronounced again in PF 3.8. Economics – 65, followed by students in PF 3.9. Tourism – 31 and finally by students studying specialties in PF 3.7. Administration and Management are 24. This suggests that analytical thinking is perceived as more typical of economic preparation.

– All of them – a small number of respondents chose this answer: 3 respondents for PF 3.8. Economics, 2 answers registered for PF 3.9. Tourism, no answers registered for PF 3.7. Administration and management. It is possible that students prefer to specify the answers or do not perceive all competencies as equally useful.

The analysis shows that students from all three majors value theoretical knowledge, communication skills and teamwork the most as being useful for their professional development. The low assessment of digital competencies is an indicator of the potential for growth and modernization of the learning process, especially given the modern requirements of the labor market. The fact that a small number of respondents choose the answer „all of them" suggests that students make a clear distinction between key and secondary competencies for them.

Results Derived from The Analysis of the Survey

The analysis of the survey conducted among students from the Faculty of Economics of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski" provides important information regarding the preparation of graduating students for a professional start, as well as their expectations and views on realization.

The following main conclusions can be drawn from the provided graphs.

First, the distribution of participants by professional field: The most participants are in the field PF 3.8. Economics (159 students) as it has the largest number of specialties, followed by PF 3.9. Tourism (79 students) and PF 3.7. Administration and Management (72 students). The specialties among the surveyed students are, respectively, in the professional field 3.7. Administration and Management, the specialty "Business Management and Entrepreneurship" dominates. In the field 3.8. Economics, the most students chose "Business Marketing and Advertising". The dominant age group is 19 – 24 years, which is typical for bachelor's programs. However, in the field 3.8. Economics, the presence of older students is also noticeable, which may indicate an interest in retraining or continuing education. The presence of participants over 43 years of age indicates a desire for education at a later stage of life, which is important for the integration of different experiences and motivations in the learning process. The most numerous are "female" students in university education. It is also important to note that the most numerous are students in bachelor and full-time education who participated in the survey. The percentage distribution of participants by professional fields provides a useful context for understanding

the interests and needs of students. These data can guide strategies for developing educational programs. The dynamic age distribution of students suggests the need for personalized approaches in education. It is recommended to organize seminars and mentoring programs that combine the experience of young and older students.

Second, a significant proportion of students in the three majors (over 40%) are unemployed, with the highest percentage in PF 3.7. Administration and Management (45.80%). This shows that many students have not yet managed to find professional employment, which may be normal for the full-time form of education, but also highlights the need to improve the links between education and the labor market. Students in PF 3.8. Economics demonstrate the highest integration in the private sector (36.50%), followed by the other two majors. This suggests that economic majors offer more opportunities for internships and work in the relevant industries. Professional employment is a major motivator. The opportunity for good employment in the labor market is a leading motive for students in all three majors. This indicates that students are oriented towards the practical aspect of their education. Over 50% of students in the three majors' express satisfaction with the chosen major, with the highest percentage in PF 3.9. Tourism. This is a positive indicator of the quality of education. The small differences between the majors indicate that satisfaction does not depend so much on the major itself, but on the individual attitudes and preferences of the students. Students from all majors would readily recommend their majors to future students. This demonstrates the positive opinion of the programs and their value.

Third, it is important to point out that there is a high level of satisfaction with the material base and learning resources. Students in the three professional fields demonstrate a high degree of satisfaction with the provided material and technical base and teaching materials. The highest score is among students in professional field 3.9. Tourism, which may be a consequence of a stronger emphasis on practical and visual elements in the training. The data show that the faculty manages to provide adequate conditions for training, meeting the needs of the specialties. Overall high satisfaction with the acquired knowledge**.** Respondents highly assess the level of knowledge acquired at the university, again most strongly expressed in the field 3.9. Tourism, followed by PF 3.7. Administration and Management and finally by PF 3.8. Economics. The manifestation of diligence in the learning process is assessed as key to the realization, as in all directions there is a clear understanding that the effort in the learning process is directly related to the future professional realization of the students. Students recognize the acquired knowledge, skills and competencies as useful, as the majority of students perceive their university knowledge and skills as actually applicable in their future work. A particularly positive impression is made by the lack of negative assessments in the professional

field 3.7. Administration and Management and PF 3.9. Tourism, which is a strong sign of the effectiveness of the training. There is a positive change in self-esteem and professional attitudes, with most students noting a positive change in their self-esteem and attitude towards realization in practice. A significant proportion of respondents indicated that they felt more confident or fully prepared for real work. However, the predominant response "to some extent" indicates that there is potential for further development of the practice-oriented elements of training, through internships, projects and work on real cases.

Conclusion

In recent years, an accelerated and difficult to predict development of the labor market has been observed. Technological changes and the pace of innovation significantly change the requirements for the skills necessary for the labor market. Many traditional professions are disappearing and new ones are emerging, and automation leads to polarization of the labor market, increasing the demand for both professions requiring high analytical and social skills, as well as non-standard professions in the field of services and social support. Today, competition for labor and talent is global. All these processes are accompanied by an increase in social inequalities worldwide and difficulties in the inclusion of certain groups in the labor market. Based on the literature and practical research, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1) Modern higher education in Bulgaria is at a crossroads between sustainability and the need for reforms, caused by the dynamics of the labor market, regional differences and the challenges of digital transformation. The analysis of the research shows that in order to achieve a higher degree of correspondence between the knowledge acquired at the university and the requirements of employers, targeted and sustainable cooperation between educational institutions, business and the scientific community is necessary. The imbalance between regional needs for personnel and the centralization of higher education requires reforms in the direction of decentralization and adaptation of training to the specifics of the local economy. Rethinking the role of higher education as a tool for economic and social development requires the creation of mechanisms for flexibility, increasing administrative and expert capacity and building stable links with secondary education and continuous training. Technological innovations change the structure of employment and emphasize the need for a higher level of qualification and skills. There are significant discrepancies between the educational preparation and real positions on the market, especially in micro and small enterprises and among vulnerable groups such as women. The Strategy for the Development of Higher Education 2021–2030 outlines important guidelines, such as strengthening the connection between education, science and innovation, prioritizing professional areas with a shortage of personnel and improving the rating assessment system.

At the same time, however, further improvement of assessment indicators and full implementation of policies for the benefit of society is necessary. Against the backdrop of globalization and transnational education, Bulgaria has significant potential for development through international cooperation. Establishing the country as an active partner in the European and global academic network can contribute both to improving the quality of higher education and to retaining and attracting young specialists to the country. The future of higher education in Bulgaria depends on strategic planning, targeted investments and integrated policies that will create conditions for sustainable development, adaptability and high added value for society and the economy.

2) The professional realization of students in Bulgaria is a complex and multi-layered process, strongly influenced by the quality of higher education, its compliance with the needs of the labor market and the development of key skills. Among the main challenges are the discrepancy between academic preparation and real economic needs, the lack of sufficient practical training, low motivation for continuing education and the underdeveloped lifelong learning system. The insufficient connection between universities and employers leads to a deficit of practical competencies and hinders the transition of young specialists from the school bench to the labor market. Outdated curricula, focused mainly on theoretical knowledge, without the active participation of business in their development, further strengthen this imbalance. There is also a significant discrepancy between the qualifications sought and offered, with many young people realizing themselves in fields other than their specialty, or occupying positions for which they are overqualified. Another significant problem is the low participation in continuing education, which limits the opportunities for adaptation to the dynamic requirements of the labor market. The development of effective forms of lifelong learning and better accessibility to short-term, practically oriented training is vital for the professional growth of young people. In the context of digitalization and the development of new technologies, the construction of a balanced professional profile, combining hard (technical) and soft (interpersonal) skills, is becoming mandatory. Employers are increasingly looking for specialists who, in addition to knowledge and qualifications, possess communication, teamwork, adaptability and leadership potential. This requires a reorientation of educational institutions towards models of training in which theory is combined with practice, innovation and personal development. In order for higher education to be an adequate response to modern socio-economic realities, strategic cooperation between universities, business, the state and the students themselves is necessary. Only through reforms based on flexibility, practical orientation and an individualized approach to training can competitiveness, sustainable professional realization and development of innovative potential among young people in Bulgaria be guaranteed.

3) Based on the survey conducted among 310 students at the South-West University "Neofit Rilski", it was found that students are motivated, engaged in their education and highly appreciate the quality of the acquired knowledge and the conditions of study. The greatest interest is observed in the specialties in the field of "Economics", with a clear understanding of the importance of professional realization as the main motivator. Nevertheless, about 40% of the students are still not working, which emphasizes the need for a stronger connection between education and the labor market. The high satisfaction with the chosen specialty, the material base and the teaching staff is a positive sign for the academic environment, but there are significant deficits in terms of digital skills and practical training. There is a need to integrate more practical elements – real cases, internships, simulations and projects. Students demonstrate a willingness to recommend their specialties and have positive self-confidence for realization, but only a quarter feel fully prepared for the professional world, which indicates the presence of gaps in the practical side of training. The data also show the need for individualized approaches to age and professional diversity among students, as well as the need for better development of flexible internship programs and digital competence. The study clearly outlines the potential for improvements through close cooperation with business, personalization of training methods and a stronger orientation to practice – key conditions for more successful implementation of students in the labor market.

REFERENCES

BROWN, P. & KEEP, E., 2018. Rethinking the race between education and technology. *Issues in Science and Technology,* vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 31 – 39. Available at: https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:f983ecb4-2baf-466b-a98d-0e9e910fe54e.

CAPLAN, B., 2018. *The case against education: why the education system is a waste of time and money*. Princeton University Press.

CEDEFOP. (2023, September 28). *Bulgaria: Study reveals mismatches between VET provision and labor market needs*. European Center for the Development of Vocational Training. Accessed on 20.04.2025. Available at: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/bulgaria-study-reveals-mismatches-between-vet-provision-and-labour-market-needs

ELLIOTT, S., W., 2017. Computers and the future of skill on demand. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/computers-and-the-future-of-skill-demand_9789264284395-en.html

FILIPOVA, M., & USHEVA, M., 2021. Social and labor relations of the digital age: to the question of future education development. *Futurity Education*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 14 – 22. DOI: https://doi.org/10.57125/FED/2022.10.11.15

ILIEVA-TRICHKOVA, P., 2014. A capability perspective him/her employability of higher education graduates in Bulgaria. *Social Work & Society,* vol. 12, no. 2. Available at: http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:hbz:464-sws-710

INSTITUTE FOR MARKET ECONOMICS. 2025. Profesionalno obrazovanie I pazar na truda – otgovarya li profesionalno obrazovanie na nuzhdite na pazara na truda? Accessed on 3.05.2025. Available at https://ime.bg/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/paper_eduempl.pdf

MINEVA-DIMITROVA, E., 2019. Sistemata na vissheto obrazovanie v bŭlgariya-problemi i predizvikatelstva. *Stopanska akademiya D. A. Tsenov, Svishtov*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331645750_SISTEMATA_NA_VISSETO_OBRAZOVANIE_V_BLGARIA-PROBLEMI_I_PREDIZVIKATELSTVA

NEYCHEVA, M., 2020. Digitalization and qualification mismatch in the labor market, Conference: Digital transformations, media and social inclusion at: Burgas Free University, Bulgaria. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342549294_DIGITALIZACIA_I_KVALIFIKACIONNI_NESOTVETSTVIA_NA_PAZARA_NA_TRUDA_DIGITALIZATION_AND_QUALIFICATION_MISMATCH_IN_THE_LABOR_MARKET

ROMANENKO, Y., N., STEPANOVA, M. & MAKSIMENKO, N., 2024. Soft Skills: students and employers crave. *Humanit Social Science Commun,* vol. 11. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03250-8.

TODOROVA, D., PETROV, K., ZHELEV, S., MIRONOVA, N. & TSONKOV, N., 2022. *Analysis and assessment of the concentration of higher education institutions at the regional level and the opportunities for their optimization.* Publ. of UNWE, ISBN: 978-619-232-593-0.

TERZIEV, V., LYUBCHEVA, M., & MIHAYLOVA, K., 2021. The Need of Changes in Bulgaria's Higher Education. *KNOWLEDGE – International Journal*, vol. 43, no. 1. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3756933 https://www.blacksea.bg/site/assets/files/1124/neobkhodimost_ot_promeni_v_v_vissheto_obrazovanie_v_b_lgariia.pdf

WATS, M., & WATS, R. K., 2009. Developing Soft Skills in Students. *The International Journal of Learning Annual Review,* vol. 15, no. 12, pp. 1 – 10. DOI: 10.18848/1447-9494/CGP/v15i12/46032.

✉ **Dr. Anny Atanasova, Chief Assist. Prof.**
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-2926-5654

✉ **Dr. Viktoriya Kalaydzhieva, Chief Assist. Prof.**
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-1825-2228

✉ **Dr. Radostina Yuleva-Chuchulayna, Chief Assist. Prof.**
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-0755-5776

✉ **Dr. Kalina Durova-Angelova, Chief Assist. Prof.**
ORCID iD: 0000-0001-8051-1342
Department of Business Management and Marketing
Faculty of Economics
South-West University "Neofit Rilski"
Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria
E-mail: aniatanasova@swu.bg
vkalaydzhieva@swu.bg
radostina_yuleva@swu.bg
kalina_durova@swu.bg