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THE SYSTEMS FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN BULGARIA AND IN GERMANY – IN SERVICE TO YOUTHS AT A DISADVANTAGE

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Resume: The present article has been developed in connection with the implementation of the project: „Innovative approaches for identifying and responding to vocational education and training needs of disadvantaged youth”, contract number BG051PO001-7.0.01-0014-C001, implemented with the financial support of the Operation program “Human resources development”, co-financed by the European Social Fund of the European Union. The main objective of the article is to review, analyze and compare the systems for vocational education in Bulgaria and Germany and to outline those advantages, which applying the German practice would bring to the specialists in Bulgarian, especially in connection with the successful identification of training needs and development of adequate training programs, consistent both to the possibilities and desires of the beneficiaries, and the needs and development trends in the labor market.

Keywords: vocational training, special training needs, labor market, disadvantaged youths

The analysis of the systems for vocational education and training (VET) in Bulgaria and Germany is focused on researching the practice in this field and outlines examples for successful and effective initiatives in the sphere of vocational training, with target group – youths at a disadvantage. The project target group are youths, which are at a disadvantage due to ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, gender, social, economic reasons, not just people with physical or intellectual disabilities, which is most frequent understanding of the term. The analysis developed within the project consists of two main parts:

- **part 1** concerns the definition of the legal framework for VET, the place and role of VET, the institutions, which provide such training, the approaches for VET, used in the two countries, problems and issues arising especially regarding access, quality and effectiveness of the VET provided to youths at a disadvantage; this part of the analysis covers the existing

laws, strategies, concepts, plans, reports, analyses, researches and other documents, as well as the existing practices in the countries;

- **part 2** concerns the approaches for identifying the training needs of youths at a disadvantage, youths in social-economic isolation and youths at risk and the approaches and methods for developing VET programs for this target group, as well as analysis of the successful and effective practices in this sphere in the two countries.

Special attention is paid to the approaches for e-learning and cultural and peer learning as innovative practices.

Legal framework

In Bulgaria, despite the implemented reform of the VET system¹⁾, the conclusion that considerable increase not just of the share of practical training in the VET schools, but also of the available conditions for increasing the effectiveness of the conducted training and production practices is necessary. Another problem is represented by the availability of work-placements for conducting practical training. The companies refuse to conduct such practices with the argument that to a certain extent such a training would harden the normal production process and would engage a part of the qualified staff. This is why in many cases the companies, which accept trainees for practical education, actually use them for implementation of unqualified or support activities, which provide no practical experience to the youths, pursued by them in the specific profession. Thus the idea of gaining practical experience in a real work-place loses its meaning. Quite often the education, which the young people receive, and the educational system they participate in, are not bound with the labor market, with the personal realization and the real life. This leads to de-motivation and early school-leaving or drop-out. These conclusions stress the necessity of new approaches in the field of VET²⁾.

An example of a good practice is the German dual VET system. The result of its application – the good and adequate to the market and the needs of the business qualification of the graduating young people – is the explanation of the fact that Germany has the lowest percentage of unemployed youth among all European countries³⁾. The researches conducted by PISA confirm once again the statement that the German educational system is characterized with a high level of social selectiveness⁴⁾. Apart from that, it also possesses a high level of “formal” permeability, which means that theoretically it is possible at each level of the educational system to be joined courses for continuous education, still this possibility is not used as much in some regions as in others. Another successful practice of the German

administration is the systematic research and collection of data, related to the future opportunities and needs of the labor market in Germany and the respective skills, which will be needed. This practice has been introduced by the “Alliance for work, education and competitiveness” within the resolutions adopted in 1999⁵⁾ and is implemented within the framework of the follow-up initiative for early identification of skills needs, undertaken by the Federal ministry of science and scientific and research activities. The main part of this initiative is the creation of the „Research network for early identification of skills needs” (FreQueNz, www.frequenz.net/). The main objective of the research network is the timely identification of future skills needs and their assessment with regard to their influence on the VET system. The focus is placed on discovering/recording the changes, which take place on the labor market, in order for an opportunity for quicker reaction, adequate to the trends in the sphere of VET skills, to be undertaken. These requirements are used for the purpose of developing models for future skills and professional profiles.

In Bulgaria the opportunities for education and work for the young people are limited (especially in the case of young people at a disadvantage) and this requires new political measures to be taken and actors to be included in the process of social integration of these groups in the society. In Germany the problem with integration of the young people at a disadvantage is a problem of the entire society and the process of providing support involves various institutions – the state (in the face of schools, VET providers, employment agencies), but also out-of-school implementers and school courses, which do not provide qualified professional training, but are a part of the transition system. Included here are also proposals for partial qualification, which can be treated equivalent to the first year of follow up education or are preconditions for starting a complete qualification training.

Methods for identification of training needs and approaches for development of the VET programs for youths at a disadvantage

In Bulgaria, regardless of the specified in various legal acts principles of equality in training, of integration of people with disabilities, of employment and professional education, of ethical treatment, a uniform policy for VET of these persons is still missing. There are various single initiatives of different state institutions and private organizations⁶⁾.

Another main difference between the systems for identification of training needs is the recognition of different categories of persons, who have extra need for help in their search for professional realization. In Germany the group of the people, who need special attention and inclusion in the VET system, includes also youths, who have finished their compulsory

education but are unemployed (they are a subject of compulsory VET)⁷⁾; the same goes for the people in poor socio-economic state (regardless whether due to poverty, discrimination on ethnic, gender or other basis). Poverty in Bulgaria is becoming a very serious problem. Almost half of all Bulgarians are on the edge of poverty and experience great hardships to pay their bills (data from Eurostat for 2011). The number of Bulgarians at risk of social exclusion has increased with 10% in 4 years.

In Germany, the comprehension that the youths with special education needs do not represent a homogenous group leads to a major change in the paradigm of the approaches for supporting them. This is how the initiative “New system for supporting youths with special educational needs” is developed and implemented” (www.neuefoerderstruktur.de) – it is a framework concept for provision of preparatory vocational training by the Federal employment agency, which unfolds the existing structure for individualized support and the qualification courses into an all-target-groups encompassing provision of integration services.

In Germany there are main training principles, which find their place in each federal program: the living environment in the focus of the training; fortified competences instead of underlined deficits; interdisciplinary and self-paced learning; concept of training oriented towards action. In Bulgaria the decision for selection of specific educational approaches is left to the persons (organizations), implementing the training. This on the one hand allows better adaptability to the target groups, freedom of choice, trying out more than one practice and finding the most appropriate for the specific needs training methods. In addition to this we need to keep in mind that the state projects and programs rely on accredited provider of VET, which to a certain extent guarantees the quality of the provided services. On the other hand however, the lack of specific parameters of the used training approaches hides the risk of using insufficiently effective ones. Compared to Germany in Bulgaria an assessment of the quality of the result from the training process and its socio-economic effectiveness is rarely done (Shuleva, 2004). The inclusion of employers in the activities for elaboration of the training program, in the assessment of the results of training, in the evaluation of the needs for training in specific professions and specializations is still far from developed.

Innovative approaches for VET and their applicability for the group of youths at a disadvantage (perspectives of the approaches for e-learning and cultural and peer learning)

More and more young people fail to find perspectives in the school and professional life. Many of them (and especially those with migration background come from poor and

uneducated families) fail to find access both to formal and to the non-formal educational channels. Most pedagogic approaches do not reach this group, which often drops out of school or leaves the VET centers. The approaches for cultural and peer learning⁸⁾ are becoming deeper integrated as pedagogic methods and especially in non-formal education. An excellent and successful example is the KinderKulturKarawane project, in which youths at an age between 16 and 24 years from Africa, Asia and Latin America at disadvantage due to socio-economic reasons present cultural performances (music, dance, theater and circus) before peers from Europe and other interested persons, in order to give them information on their lives and their vision for a brighter future, but also demonstrate how such activities can create a chance for social integration. Through these presentations, workshops and direct meetings with the young artists – peer learning – the youths from Europe discover parallels with their own often also insecure social and economic reality. Additionally they get to know innovative and creative perspectives and strategies for encouraging social integration. The cultural and not merely cognitive approach in combination with peer learning transfers many direct problems with political and socio-integration nature, as well as possible solutions and presents specific experience with regard to the importance of the socio-cultural exchanges.

The motivation and the successful results of the target group come from 1) the understanding of the fact that another peer is capable to perform a certain act; 2) the lack of clearly defined, and which is more important, graded assessments of the implementation of the tasks; 3) the inclusion in a bigger team or group of equal participants; 4) shifting of the focus aside from the formal environment. At the same time the child/youth is a subject of involuntary non-formal learning: his/her social skills are undergoing serious testing by the other participants (he/she should participate in a common activity with other strangers; and to learn a new skill under the guidance of other equal peer participants), overcome a possible linguistic or cultural barrier (what happens when peers come from different cultures will be mentioned below), discover ways for self-expression through a newly acquired interest towards the respective activity. In addition to that the cultural and peer learning can oppose the dominating stereotypes considering the target group it is mostly focused upon – youth; thanks to the active interaction with other youths with different cultural background, the students should seriously rethink their prejudices and paradigms.

At an individual level the cultural and peer learning influences the emotional and social skills, it unlocks the so called reciprocal vulnerability among the trainees and its inherent logic; it forces the participants to become an active, initiative undertaking side. This is why the peer approach in the cultural activities could come forward as the most effective learning

form – considering how more successfully peers adopt skills from other peers compared to trainers, as well as considering the broad scope of positive side effects from the unlocking of the social skills (Kozareva & Bozhilov, 2010).

In **conclusion** we would like to share that within the framework of project „Innovative approaches for identifying and responding to vocational education and training needs of disadvantaged youth” the team of the partnership will make all necessary efforts to transfer some of the good German practices in the sphere of VET for youths at a disadvantage so that the German experience in providing vocational support to youths at risk and in socio-economic isolation is adopted also on the territory of Bulgaria. The main aim is for the efforts to be directed towards the concept of specific focus on the individual, who needs support, from two points of view - specifying the training needs, but also developing adequate VET programs, because the one sided concept of considering the target group as homogenous, for each member of which are enforced the same general objectives and methodic approaches, makes specifying correctly the exact and efficient proposal to each person, as well as his/her flexible transition between support measures or vocational integration much harder. We will also put the stress on the system of assessment both of the training results from the point of view of the specified objectives, but also from the point of view of its effectiveness in socio-economic plan including for the particular individual. One has to consider a project for support of professional integration of young people, which is not situated in a vague place in space, but exactly in the living quarters where all participants in the event come from. That is the place, which they know best and feel best in. The aim of such a project would not be to merely create a product, which could be useful somewhere, but to create a product, which is needed and useful for the place where its beneficiaries live.

In such a project the young people can at the same time learn important life techniques and through practice learn competences, which are important for the labor market. Most importantly however, these new skills would be structured relatively independently, on the basis of unconscious success on the labor market, and the youth would accumulate experience with particular usefulness and specific applicability. This would have a positive influence on the social status, social belonging, self-assessment and the personality of the youths – even if they fail to start immediately with the most appropriate job.

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NOTES

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