

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF BULGARIA

1. INTRODUCTION

The difficult transition to liberal democracy and a market economy in post-communist Bulgaria has been in progress now for more than a decade. In this context, the higher education system has already experienced a significant transformation. A re-evaluation of the underlying principles of higher education, a restructuring of its legal basis, a rapid increase in the number of students, programs, and institutions, and the introduction of the bachelor-master-doctor degree structure are among the most visible changes that have taken place. Academic reform, however, has faced serious challenges. On the one hand, numerous shifts of government over the past decade have led to the construction of different, often conflicting, policy directives for academia. On the other hand, a drastic decrease in financial support for higher education has resulted in a deterioration of the educational infrastructure and affected the quality of education in Bulgaria. Finally, resilient practices and values from the communist past have further hindered educational reform.

Perhaps one of the most notable developments that took place after 1989 was the re-establishment of the private sector in higher education¹. Different factors have stimulated the emergence of private higher education institutions. They include the political shift itself, which brought with it favorable conditions supporting the founding of diverse university structures, as well as the fact that private institutions appeared in response to the increasing demand for higher education. However, the private sector in Bulgaria did not expand to such a large extent as it did, for example, in Romania or Poland. One possible reason may be the existence of paid higher education at public universities, introduced after the political changes and terminated in 1999 when universal tuition fees were put in place for all students in public institutions of higher education. Through this mechanism, public universities admitted – for a considerable annual fee – increased numbers of students over and above the state-subsidized quota. The peak occurred in the academic year 1996/1997, when the numbers of fee-paying students accounted for almost half of the entire student population.

Private universities started operating before their actual recognition by Parliament. One such institution – the Slavic University in Sofia – existed for four years before being closed by Parliament in 1999 due to administrative irregularities. For the last ten years or so, however, private higher education has succeeded in establishing itself as a separate sector, distinct from public higher education not only in the form of ownership but also in funding sources, institutional structures, and educational forms.

¹ The history of private higher education in Bulgaria predates the communist period: in 1924 the private Free University for Political and Economic Studies was established. The communist regime eliminated private initiatives and placed higher education under the control of the state.

This document provides a comprehensive review of the development and the present status of the Bulgarian higher education sector. It offers a detailed analysis of different aspects of both public and private higher education such as accreditation, financing, structure, and enrollment levels. The main goal of this paper is to provide an informed basis for comparing the evolution and status of the two higher education sectors against the more general backdrop of the overall transformation of higher education in Bulgaria.

2. REFORMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN BULGARIA

Throughout the history of Bulgarian higher education, university organization and operations have been defined by prescriptive laws. Frequently, these legal acts, passed by the Bulgarian Parliament, have been abolished or amended with the change of political governments. The different, often drastic, changes in the normative base of higher education, highly dependent on political discretion, reflect the general inconsistency in the steering of higher education policy in Bulgaria (Todorov, 1999). Yet another legislative characteristic has been the reactive character of the laws, for often changes in higher education have simply been reflected in upcoming laws. Given the central role of the legal framework in initiating changes, three different reform periods could be constructed around the higher education laws passed by the different governments.

The **first wave of reforms**, which began with the period directly following the democratic changes of 1989, is characterized by sporadic and impulsive developments in the Bulgarian system of higher education. This occurred “within the framework of an economic crisis of immense dimensions, and teaching staff which, in its majority, were members of the former communist party” (Penkov, 1992, p. 96). In 1990, the Law on the Academic Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions was passed, marking the first wave of transition in higher education.

In the period between 1990 and 1995, the system of higher education expanded quickly. The fast growth of the sector is documented in the large increase in student enrolment, from approximately 130,000–140,000 at the beginning of 1990–1992 to 250,000–260,000 in 1995–1996 (Buchkov, 1998). Program and institutional diversity increased significantly: the number of specializations that were offered almost doubled to exceed 500 in 1996 (Stamov, 1996), as did the number of higher education institutions – from 21, in 1990, to 42, in 1995 – (Penkov, 1992). Furthermore, private institutions of higher education were founded, and this expansion stimulated competition. An interesting phenomenon during this period is the introduction of so-called “paid education” which was an institutional means of responding to the climbing demand for higher education. Fee-paying students were admitted over and above the state-subsidized quota, and paid education was offered at state institutions of higher education and took place in parallel with state subsidized education carried out by the same faculty in

the same facilities or in special educational centers called “filials” (i.e., branches). These were situated in different towns all over the country, and, as units of the parent institution, they were usually “served” by faculty from that same institution who later came to be known as “traveling” or “suitcase” professors.

The developments described above were also accompanied by a number of problems. Spending per student plummeted as funding for higher education in the 1990s was drastically reduced (see Table 1, Total Public Expenditures on Education, by Level, 1990 and 2000, Bulgaria). The rapid increase in student numbers was not accompanied by a proportional increase in faculty numbers. Moreover, the large increase in student enrollments was not common to all academic fields but only to those fields in high demand, such as law, economics, business, pedagogy, and applied linguistics. No internal mechanisms for the regulation of the quality of teaching were developed, and there was growing concern about educational quality. The lack of adequate financial support for teaching and research contributed to the decline of academic standards.

The **second wave of reforms** was initiated by the 1995 Law on Higher Education. On the one hand, this legal act re-established state control in higher education. On the other hand, it proposed corrections to the negative developments of the previous period, and some mechanisms for quality assurance at the state level were established, including the creation of a National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency to verify compliance with the State Requirements for quality. These requirements were issued at the central level for every single specialization. The 1995 Law also created a register of specializations in an attempt to limit the ever-growing number of narrow specializations offered by institutions of higher education (see also sub-section 6.3. on fields of study). The 1995 law was significantly amended in 1999 with the Changes and Amendments to the 1995 Law on Higher Education, which attempted to link institutional autonomy with increased responsibility and accountability. A very important step was the introduction of the requirement that institutions of higher education develop internal mechanisms for quality assurance. As a result, changes in programs, staffing, and equipment made by institutions needed to be justified, new programs and courses had to be externally evaluated and accepted, and enrollment sizes were to be limited to the levels corresponding to the actual institutional capacities.

The 1995 reform efforts were also aimed at changing the structure of the higher education system in line with the efforts for integration into the educational structures of the European Union. According to Popov, “Bulgaria must prove that an Eastern European country can, despite financial and other challenges, achieve the standards of quality of Western European higher education” (Popov, 2001, p. 28). A transition from a narrowly specialized to a broad-based higher education was initiated. The bachelor and master degree levels were established, and with some further clarification in the 1999 Amendments to the Higher Education Law, the initial confusion around the conception of this three-level structure was gradually overcome.

The **third wave of reforms** coincided with the rise to power of King Simeon II’s party in the summer of 2001. After the 1999 Amendments, different educational reform priorities occupied the

governmental agenda. One set of priorities was to consolidate the number of public higher education institutions, to reform or close university branches, and to reduce the number of specializations offered. A gradual decline in student enrollments, justified by demographic predictions and characterized as the “demassification” of higher education (Popov, 2000), was initiated at the central level. In addition, discussions began concerning the State Requirements and the State Register of Specialties as documents supporting narrow specialization. In May, 2002, the government passed minor amendments to the Higher Education Law, subsequent to which some progress has been made towards lessening the prerogative powers and interference of government in university life and overcoming the compartmentalization of specialties. Universities are now able to develop competing curricula, to individualize their studies, to re-allocate their students to different faculties and specialties internally, and to provide more flexibility for students in choosing their programs of study.

Within this general framework, the current government is preparing a comprehensive revision of the Higher Education Law. Still under discussion, the new legal changes will be linked with the very controversial drafts of yet another legal document, vital for the development of the academic profession – the Law on Academic Degrees and Titles – which provides the basis for the system of academic appointments and promotions in Bulgarian higher education.

3. LEGISLATION AND GOVERNING BODIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN BULGARIA

3.1. Legislation in Higher Education

Today, the development of higher education is guided by the 1995 Higher Education Law, its 1999 and 2002 Changes and Amendments, and the 1972 Law on Academic Degrees and Titles. General issues concerning university staff follow the Labor Code. The financing of state institutions of higher education is directed by the Law on the Construction of the State Budget and the annual Law on the State Budget. The Law on Academic Degrees and Titles which regulates the status of the academic profession dates from the communist period, although there have been some “cosmetic” changes to it throughout the decade. Attempts to reconsider the existing faculty appointment and promotion procedures have occupied the biggest portion of the 1990s. A final draft is still under discussion in Parliament. A number of changes have been recommended, but many of the controversial issues have remained and are still under intense debate; these include the proposal for the elimination of the second doctoral degree (of Doctor of Sciences), and the abolition of the central body for awarding scientific degrees and titles and transferring a large portion of the responsibility to the universities themselves.

The 1995 Law on Higher Education and the 1999 Changes and Amendments to the 1995 Law on Higher Education introduced important reform steps in the system of higher education. Minor amendments were also introduced in 2002. A brief summary of the major reform measures follows.

The 1995 Law on Higher Education:

- created Uniform State Requirements for course content and a State Register of Specialties listing nationally approved specializations (art. 9 and 10);
- established a National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency to assess the level of institutional and program compliance with state requirements (art. 11);
- recognized private institutions of higher education (art. 15) and the different institutional structures and modes of operation that exist (art. 36);
- authorized institutions of higher education to form their own out-of-budget funds and make decisions upon their use (art. 21);
- defined in detail the structure, form, and organization of the study process (arts. 39-42);
- introduced the bachelor-master-doctor structure of higher education (art. 42).

The 1999 Changes and Amendments of the 1995 Law on Higher Education:

- required the development of internal systems (including student opinion) to evaluate the quality of education and academic staff (art. 6);
- demanded a minimum number of permanent habilitated² staff in the composition of mostly all university structures (art. 17 and 26)³;
- authorized the Rector's Council to officially represent the interests of the institutions of higher education before the state bodies (art. 23);
- recognized the department as one of the basic institutional units together with the faculty, institute, and college (art. 25);
- created the Control Council as an organ for the internal monitoring of institutional activities (art. 34a);
- incorporated the "specialist" degree (awarded by colleges) into the higher education system as the first level of higher education (art. 42); thus the Bulgarian higher education degree system is comprised of four consecutive levels: specialist, bachelor, master, and doctor;
- provided for more flexibility in the educational process (such as the possibility of a second parallel specialization) and demanded arrangements alleviating student continuation in higher degree levels and transfers amongst specializations, institutional units, and institutions (art. 42);
- eliminated fee-paying programs and introduced mandatory tuition fees for all students (art. 95).

The 2002 Changes and Amendments of the 1995 Law on Higher Education:

- create a Classifier of the fields in higher education institutions and vocational schools (art. 9);

² Habilitation denotes a professional step in academia that corresponds to the titles of docent (associate professor) and professor and is expressed in the right to offer a course in a given discipline (and read lectures); habilitation is achieved by faculty members after the completion of a major research work or creative activity.

³ For instance, 70 percent of the lectures in each specialization must be conducted by habilitated professors. In addition, each department is required to employ at least 40 staff members on permanent contracts, of which 20 must be habilitated. Department Councils are required to include between 25 and 35 members, of which no less than two-thirds must be habilitated.

- replace the “Unified State Requirements” with “state requirements” for most specializations except for the ‘regulated professions’ such as law, medicine, and architecture (art. 9);
- provide that the level of student enrollments should be determined centrally only for the institution and not for each specialization (although the Ministry Council will still determine the overall number of students admitted to private universities) (art. 9);
- enhance the capacities of higher education institutions with the highest accreditation marks to offer master and doctoral programs (art. 21);
- give students more flexibility in choosing their specialization in masters and doctoral programs (art. 42);
- allow institutions of higher education to appeal before the court in case they are not satisfied with their accreditation grades (art. 81 and 82).

With respect to private higher education, the current legislature has made significant progress in supporting the operation of existing private institutions. The 1995 Law on Higher Education incorporated private institutions in the higher education system for the first time – subsequent to their actual establishment. Moreover, these universities were recognized as institutions that would have different structures and modes of operation – an issue further strengthened by the 1999 Changes and Amendments with the recognition of the department as a basic institutional unit. The legal acts also created requirements for the establishment of other private institutions, which include a project as well as a founding act. A paradox created legally and dealt with on an individual basis was that, in their attempts to receive national accreditation, private institutions are also required to comply with all state standards. This requirement presented numerous difficulties to the institutions and their different institutional structures, forms of governance, and programs. Should private institutions fail to file an application for accreditation or be rejected for accreditation, the state, which defines the total number of students to be admitted to private institutions, stops future student admissions. Yet another paradox, retained by the present government and supported by the 2002 Amendments to the Law, is the fact that the government still sets the total number of student enrollments not only for public universities but also for private institutions.

3.2. Governing Bodies in Higher Education

In Bulgaria, the state regulates higher education through Parliament and the Council of Ministers. The Parliament opens, changes and closes institutions of higher education; it also defines annually the subsidy for each state institution. The Council of Ministers steers higher education policy. It opens and closes institutional units in the state sector of higher education, approves the State Register of Specialties and the Unified State Requirements, approves annually the number of students to be admitted and the state admission requirements, the student tuition fees, the distribution of stipends, the recognition of

diplomas from abroad, the state diploma contents, as well as the regulations of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (see below).

State policy is executed through the Ministry of Education and Science. This body plays the coordinating role between the state and the institutions of higher education. It also exercises control over universities and colleges with respect to their compliance with the law and state requirements.

At the end of 1996, the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA, the Agency) was set up as a specialized state body for the evaluation and the accreditation of the quality of education. The Agency was created based on the recommendations of the Council of Europe's Educational Division and of the European Union Commission on Education and Science, with financial support from the World Bank. Its regulations are defined by the Council of Ministers. The Agency develops criteria for evaluation and accreditation according to the Higher Education Law and the Unified State Requirements for the different specializations. It has an Accreditation Council which organizes and controls the objectivity in every procedure. The Accreditation Council is comprised of a head (who is also the head of NEAA) and 8 members appointed for a 6 year term. All members are habilitated faculty from the basic scientific fields, and four represent institutions of higher education, two represent the National Academy of Sciences and the National Center for Agricultural Sciences, while two represent the Ministry of Education and Science. The members of the Accreditation Council evaluate the work of the Permanent Committees in the respective scientific fields. There are also Expert Groups, created for each accreditation procedure.

4. ENSURING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN BULGARIA: ACCREDITATION

The 1995 Law on Higher Education introduced state accreditation for all institutions of higher education in the country. Accreditation in the Bulgarian context means recognition by the NEAA that the activity and the quality of education at a given institution of higher education correspond to the Higher Education Law and the State Requirements. The accreditation requirements are the same for all institutions. Accreditation results are also linked to student enrollment allocations and state subsidies: should an institution fail to file an application for accreditation or be rejected for accreditation, the state stops future student admissions and, in the case of public universities only, terminates funding. The major goal in accreditation is to stimulate the institutions of higher education to develop their potential and to upgrade and maintain the quality of their education.

There are two types of accreditation:

- institutional accreditation – when the overall organization, structure and activity of the institution should correspond to the requirements of the Law – and
- program accreditation – according to which the quality of education at a given institution is judged for each specialization at the different program levels of specialist, bachelor, master, and doctor.

Institutional accreditation precedes program accreditation. Institutions of higher education or their founders (in the case of private institutions) request the initiation of the accreditation process or the evaluation of a project. By law, the process should take no longer than six months to complete. The NEAA awards a grade, issues recommendations (when the decision is positive) or puts forth motives for denial (when the decision is negative), and sets the term for the validity of the accreditation. There are four possible grade levels in accreditation: very good, good, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory. If a university receives a “very good” or “good”, its accreditation is valid for 5 years; if it receives a “satisfactory” grading, then it becomes accredited for three years. In addition, institutions of higher education and research organizations can educate doctors in given fields provided that their program accreditation in this field was graded with a “very good”. Rejections of accreditation are accompanied by recommendations and deadlines for their fulfillment. The NEAA also evaluates projects for the opening and reorganization of higher education institutions, their units or independent colleges, as well as the introduction of new specializations/programs. Projects for opening new institutions or institutional units are evaluated with a negative or a positive grade.

As of June of 1999, the Accreditation Council of the NEAA had completed 21 institutional accreditations, 2 positive accreditations for colleges, and 2 negative project evaluations for the opening of new institutions; in addition, 209 program accreditations had also been completed. With the 1999 Amendments to the Higher Education Law, a new accreditation Council was appointed by the Prime Minister. By June 2001, the institutional accreditations completed numbered 27.

Licensing requirements are regulated by the Law on Higher Education. Projects for opening new/private institutions of higher education, submitted by the founders, must be approved by the NEAA. Projects also need to be accompanied by a Founding Act containing the type, name, and place of the institution, the focus of activity, information about the founder, a description of the property and of financing means, an explanation of the governing and representation of the institution, and a description of the rights and obligations of the founders.

A difficulty encountered by private institutions comes from the uniformity of the accreditation standards for all institutions seeking accreditation or national recognition. Thus, accreditation standards for private education reflect requirements for education offered at state institutions. The criteria for accrediting programs are familiar “old” disciplines. As a result, attempts on the part of private institutions to receive national accreditation – with their different institutional structures, forms of governance and programs – have been met with resistance (Slantcheva, 2002a). At present, institutional accreditation has been given to the four private universities that have been in existence for some time now (the newly-registered institutions have operated for less than a year). Major difficulties are expected to be encountered by some of these institutions in their forthcoming program accreditation.

5. HIGHER EDUCATION FINANCE IN BULGARIA

By law, the state subsidizes the education of students in public institutions of higher education and assures stipends and housing under specific conditions. In the Law on the State Budget, the Parliament approves the state subsidy for the education sector which includes higher education. Transfers to public institutions of higher education are part of this sum (see Table 1). Private institutions do not receive any support from the state budget; the only assistance the state provides is exemption from taxes and duties, and, on specific occasions, some direct financial support to a private institution⁴.

The major source of funding for the public sector in higher education is the state budget. Institutions of higher education submit their annual budget proposals to the Ministry of Education, which offers the Ministry of Finance a project for budget subsidies for the institutions of higher education. The Ministry of Finance develops its own project for institutional subsidies, and a final version is submitted to the Council of Ministers and Parliament for approval. The method for allocating funding to a given institution is heavily influenced by lobbying and seems to be serially correlated in time. For instance, in the last three years, there has been relative stability in the financing of public institutions of higher education, and transfers have remained around 0.7 percent of the GDP (Ministry of Education and Science, 2001). The state covers, on average, approximately 70 percent of all institutional expenses (although this figure varies across institutions).

According to the Law, the state budget provides sources for the following:

- The educational process. This accounts for approximately seventy-one percent of the overall subsidy, and is a function of the number of staff and their salaries and insurance payments, as well as of the number of students and the cost per student set by the Ministry.
- Research or creative activity, including textbook and research publications. This is not less than 10 percent, and there is a trend to increase such support. However, only rarely do institutions receive even 1 percent of support of the total subsidy for research and development.
- Living expenses for regular students and doctoral candidates, including stipends, subsidized room, board, transportation and other services.

Starting in 2000/2001, all students, regardless of the form of education, may apply for stipends. Stipend funds are allocated to institutions proportional to the number of students enrolled, and criteria for awarding stipends are defined by at the level of the institutions, in cooperation with student councils. Stipends have increased almost twice compared to two years ago.

- Capital investments. These include funding for the repair and maintenance of educational facilities and the acquisition of long-term material assets.

In higher education finance, tuition fees have been an important new source starting with the academic year 1999/2000. Currently, all students in public institutions of higher education pay tuition

⁴ For instance, the American University in Bulgaria, a joint venture between the U.S. and Bulgaria, receives financial support from both governments.

fees, which are set annually by the Council of Ministers and vary by degree (for instance, masters students pay higher fees), as well as by field of study. In addition, although this form was terminated as of 1999, there are still students from previous years who are enrolled in the paid form of education at state institutions. Finally, many state institutions may offer adult education courses, for which students pay tuition fees.

Public institutions of higher education do not offer any organized student loan system, but students may approach banks on a personal basis and receive loans as regular users. However, such loans do not offer preferential terms with respect to interest rates, payment deadlines, or payment schedules. Furthermore, loans must be guaranteed with the remunerations of the student's parents. As a result, very few students resort to loans.

As of 1999, public higher education institutions may also receive funding from the regional authorities. In addition, a very small portion of their funds comes from donors and sponsors, as well as from research, consulting, art, medical, and sport activities, and ownership rights.

According to the Higher Education Law, state universities have their own budgets. This budget is under the control of the Academic Council of the institution, and it is comprised of:

- state subsidies;
- financial support from the districts;
- donations, inheritance, sponsorship;
- tuition fees and admission fees;
- revenues from research, consulting, art or creative, medical or sport activities;
- revenues from post-graduate qualification courses and other similar educational activities.

Recently, salary expenses have increased from 40.7 percent of all revenue in 1999 to 43 percent in 2001. This increase has been covered so far through an increase in state subsidies.

By contrast to public universities, private institutions have a variety of sponsors, both national and international, and most institutions receive funds through different international and national programs in which they participate. In addition, tuition fees in the private higher education sector – set by the institutions themselves and much higher than the mandatory annual tuition fees in the state universities – are a major source of funding.

6. THE EVOLUTION AND CURRENT STATUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BULGARIA

Bulgaria has a dual system of higher education, in that it comprises universities and specialized institutes (which offer programs in only one field of science, art, sport, or military training), as well as colleges, all of which can be either public or private. Most universities that existed at the beginning of the 1990s are still functioning. Many of them adopted university status often "assisted by an influx of foreign

assistance programs” (Popov 2001, p. 27). This mass institutional move toward “becoming” universities was even legally facilitated: universities were denoted as the institutions that offer programs at all degree levels in the four educational and scientific fields – humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and technical sciences. Institutions that offer programs in one or two academic fields are also considered universities, but have been given titles which reflect their specific educational and scientific fields (such as the Technical University and the Medical University, for instance).

With the Law of 1995, the semi-higher institutes were replaced by colleges. Colleges offer professional higher education and award specialist degrees. The Bulgarian system for professional higher education dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. However, a current problem involves a growing tendency to view professional education not as a terminal degree leading to immediate employment but instead as a first step towards a bachelor degree. Other problems with professional education in Bulgaria include the dependence on visiting university lecturers, and the tendency for college graduates to continue their education in part-time university programs, while college programs duplicate university programs (Popov, 2001).

6.1. Number of Institutions and Geographic Distribution in Public and Private Higher Education

In the last decade or so, the supply of higher education in Bulgaria increased significantly, at least in quantitative terms. This trend was stimulated by a number of factors, such as the introduction of the paid form of education (which existed for several years), the opening of different centers and units as university extensions, the appearance of private institutions in the country, and the establishment of many new specializations. In the academic year 2001/2002, there were 90 institutions of higher education situated in 26 towns of Bulgaria. Of these, 42 were universities and specialized institutes, and 48 were colleges (see Table 2, Number of Higher Education Institutions, Academic Staff, and Total Enrollment, in 1990/1991 and 2001/2002, in Bulgaria). In general, the total number of the universities and the specialized institutes has remained relatively unchanged in the last few years. Of all universities and specialized institutes, 37 were state and 5 were privately owned.

The public university sector accounts for 90 percent of all students in the country, and consists of 8 comprehensive universities, 12 specialized universities, 6 academies, 4 institutes, and 7 military schools (which enroll 4 percent of all students). The 42 state colleges account for 9 percent of all enrollments. Student programs have remained largely predetermined, with little choice in selecting courses, and only with occasional electives included in the curricula. The lecture method of teaching predominates.

In the academic year 2001/2002, the 11 private universities and colleges in Bulgaria enrolled close to 13 percent of the total student population in the country (see Table 2)⁵. Private universities differ in a number of respects from public institutions. They employ different institutional structures and organize the educational process differently. In addition, they offer a variety of non-traditional programs, which gives them an advantage over public universities. Both the New Bulgarian University and the American University in Bulgaria follow the liberal arts education model. The American University in Bulgaria offers bachelors degrees in eight majors in the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. At the New Bulgarian University, students study in departments that correspond to the degrees: Free Faculty, Bachelor Faculty and Master Faculty. Distance education programs are offered at the Center for Distance Education. There are more than 25 departments at the institution, and the number of programs offered at the different educational levels exceeds 100. Both the American University in Bulgaria and the New Bulgarian University are the only institutions in the country that evaluate student progress using a credit system. The Varna Free University offers education in 28 specializations integrated in five Scientific and Educational Complexes. At Burgas Free University, 24 specializations are offered by seven departments organized in centers. All private institutions, with the exception of the American University and the Higher School in Insurance and Finances, offer the traditional part-time studies.

The private Slavic University in Sofia is a specific case that is worth mentioning. The institution received its official recognition by Parliament in 1995. However, during the period of its existence, a number of irregularities attracted the attention of the governing bodies and were subject to wide national debate. Finally, in the face of allegations that the university was not able to outline its structure and activities in the University Regulations and that for a long period of time it functioned under two parallel governing bodies which admitted two different student cohorts simultaneously and collected their tuition fees, the Bulgarian Parliament decided to close the university. On March 16, 1999, the national government terminated the operation of the institution. The students of the Slavic University were redistributed among other institutions of higher education, according to rules defined by the Council of Ministers and the willingness of universities themselves to graduate students from the closed university.

6.2. Enrollment Levels, Faculty, and Staff in Public and Private Higher Education

Within a decade, by the academic year 2001/2002, student numbers had increased by roughly 18 percent (see Table 2). Whereas in 1990 there were 24.2 students to 1000 inhabitants in Bulgaria, in 2002

⁵ The five private universities included the New Bulgarian University (approximately 7,500 students), Burgas Free University (with 6,600 students), Varna Free University (with 9,000 students), the American University in Bulgaria (700 students), and the Higher School in Insurance and Finances in Sofia (with close to 600 students). Although not yet officially registered, another private university was recognized by Parliament in 2002, namely the International Higher Business School in Botevgrad. The college private sector has also grown, although it accounts less than 1 percent of all students in the country (studying for a specialist degree).

there were 28.5 students to 1000 inhabitants. Student enrollments in full-time education rose by roughly 40 percent whereas in part-time education they almost doubled (see Table 3, The Structure of Higher Education Enrollment, by Types of Programs, in 1990/1991 and 1999/2000, in Bulgaria). By contrast, enrollments at colleges have decreased by roughly 43 percent.

These numbers must be viewed in the context of the government's intention to decrease student enrollments in the last two years, in response not only to demographic forecasts of a decline of the student population in the future, but also to calculations concerning the real capacities of institutions of higher education to accommodate students. Consequently, enrollments decreased by 16 percent in public institutions, compared to 12 percent in private universities (National Statistical Institute, 2002).

According to the official statistics, despite the growth of the higher education sector, this has not been proportionately accompanied by a growth in the number of professors or teaching staff: there has been essentially no increase between the academic years 1990/1991 and 2001/2002 (see Table 2). The number of faculty members in public institutions of higher education has in fact decreased by almost 9 percent. By contrast, in the private sector, the number increased by 2 percent over the decade (National Statistical Institute, 2002). In 2001/2002, 66 percent of the faculty members in the public sector and 27 percent of those in the private sector were employed full-time (National Statistical Institute, 2002). These figures point to the still strong dependence of private institutions of higher education on visiting or part-time faculty. With respect to the academic staff in general, a troubling phenomenon has been noted: 42 percent of docents are 55 years of age or older, while the comparable number for professors is 91 percent (Slantcheva, 2002b). The situation is rather troubling for both the public and private sector of higher education, for it is habilitated staff that is usually being employed by both types of institutions.

6.3. Fields of Study

With the political shift and the turn towards a market-driven economy, higher education has experienced a dramatic change in the relative demand for the various fields of study. Whereas most students were enrolled in technical and pedagogical specializations at the beginning of the decade, in 2000 the highest percentage of students was enrolled in the field of economic management and business administration – 21.3 percent (see Table 4: The Structure of Higher Education Enrollment, by Field, in 1990/1991, in Bulgaria, and Table 5: The Structure of Higher Education Enrollment, by Field, in 1999/2000). The former have still preserved their appeal, although to a lesser extent (see Table 6, The Structure of Enrollment in Higher Education, by Degree and Field, 1998/1999 – 2001/2002, in Bulgaria).

After the 1990 Law on Academic Autonomy, the number of specializations, just like institutions and students, quickly increased to exceed 500. As a result, a special effort was undertaken in 1997 to reduce the number of specializations by implementing a State Register of Specialties. The Register reduced the number of specializations to 203. In the long run, however, this Register has appeared as a

hindrance to the introduction of the new bachelor-master degree structure, and in 2002 it was replaced by a Classifier which denotes the general fields of higher education.

7. COMPLYING WITH EUROPEAN UNION STANDARDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Bulgaria, like most post-communist societies, redirected its efforts towards entering the European Union right after the fall of the totalitarian regime, and the country was given associate membership in 1993. Negotiations for full membership were started in January 2000. Amongst the first chapters to be closed and signed by the Bulgarian government and the European Commission were those on “Education and Professional Qualification” and “Science and Research”. The agreement on the completion of these two chapters signaled that the educational legislative framework in Bulgaria possessed the requisite conditions for accession to the European Union. In this context, Bulgaria joined the European move to focus on the recognition and transparency of higher education and supported the drive towards the “Harmonization of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System” expressed in the Lisbon Declaration of 1997, the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, the Bologna Declaration of 1999, and the European Ministers of Education Prague Summit in 2001. In the spirit of the Bologna process, Bulgarian higher education introduced the bachelor-master-doctor system, instituted accreditation and is planning the introduction of a transfer credit system (included in the expected 2003 changes to the Higher Education Law). The ratification of the Lisbon Convention by the Bulgarian Parliament (Parliament of Bulgaria, 2000a) created the legal framework for progress in the area of academic recognition, including the criteria and procedures for the recognition of educational documents issued by Bulgarian institutions of higher education in parallel with the defined parameters of the Council of Europe and the European Union. Bulgaria is also an active participant in the majority of European programs and projects.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Over the past decade, higher education has been one of the most rapidly evolving sectors in Bulgaria. Its legislation on education has been successfully harmonized with that of the European Union due to the small number of legal documents in this area. In the long run, although predictions are difficult to make, some possible developments can be noted. They include: a gradual decrease of student numbers due to higher education policy as well as other demographic, financial, and societal factors, a contraction of the overall system, a continuous decline of state funding, and an increase of state financial control. Within this environment, the private higher education sector – not directly dependent on state

financial support – is expected to strengthen its position within the system. And, indeed, the interest in private universities has already grown quickly despite the small numbers of students they enroll and their high tuition fees. Once considered a place for students who failed to enter state institutions of higher education, private universities have succeeded in improving their image within the Bulgarian society and have gained greater legitimacy.

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Table 1
Total Public Expenditures on Education, by Level, in 1990 and 2000, in Bulgaria

Public expenditures	1990		2000	
	In mln. BGL	As percent of GDP	In mln. BGL	As percent of GDP
Total public expenditures for education <i>of which:</i>	2,246.6	4.5	334.6	3.8
For higher education	518.1	1.0	212.5	1.4

Source: Parliament of Bulgaria (1990a) and Marinov (2002).

Table 2
Number of Higher Education Institutions, Academic Staff, and Total Enrollment, in 1990/1991 and 2001/2002, in Bulgaria

	1990/1991		2001/2002	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total number of institutions	84	100.0	90	100.0
Public	84	100.0	79	87.8
Private	0	0.0	11	12.2
<i>of which:</i>				
Universities and specialized institutes	38	45.1	42	46.7
Public	38	100.0	37	88.1
Private	0	0.0	5	11.9
Semi-higher institutes / colleges	46	54.9	48	53.3
Public	46	100.0	42	87.5
Private	0	0.0	6	12.5
Academic staff	23,663	100.0	23,888	100.0
Public	23,663	100.0	21,570	90.3
Universities and institutes	20,716	87.5	19,444	90.1
Semi-higher institutes / colleges	2,947	12.5	2,126	9.9
Private	0	0.0	2,318	9.7
Universities and institutes	0	0.0	2,102	90.7
Semi-higher institutes / colleges	0	0.0	216	9.3
Total number of students (including post-graduate students)	193,502	100.0	228,394	100.0
Public institutions	193,502	100.0	199,716	87.4
Universities and institutes	161,559	83.5	181,516	90.9
Semi-higher institutes / colleges	31,943	16.5	18,200	9.1
Private institutions	0	0.0	28,678	12.6
Universities and institutes	0	0.0	25,712	89.7
Semi-higher institutes / colleges	0	0.0	2,966	10.3

Source: National Statistical Institute (1995 and 2002).

Table 3
The Structure of Higher Education Enrollment, by Types of Programs,
in 1990/1991 and 1999/2000, in Bulgaria

Types of programs	1990/1991		1999/2000	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total students	183,453	100.0	261,321	100.0
Full-time	136,586	72.5	176,264	66.9
Universities and institutes	111,238	81.4	163,934	92.9
Public	111,238	100.0	150,254	91.6
Private	0	0.0	13,680	8.4
Semi-higher institutes / colleges	25,348	18.6	12,330	7.1
Public	25,348	100.0	11,271	91.4
Private	0	0.0	1,059	8.6
Part-time, evening & distance / correspondence	46,867	27.5	85,057	33.1
Universities and institutes	40,272	85.2	78,926	92.6
Public	40,272	100.0	67,708	85.5
Private	0	0.0	11,218	14.5
Semi-higher institutes / colleges	6,595	14.8	6,131	7.4
Public	6,595	100.0	4,674	76.2
Private	0	0.0	1,457	23.8

Source: National Statistical Institute (1995 and 2002).

Table 4
The Structure of Higher Education Enrollment, by Field, in 1990/1991, in Bulgaria

Fields of study	Number of students	Percent
University and pedagogical specialties	52,019	34.3
Arts	2,517	1.7
Economic management and administration	24,448	16.1
Medical sciences	11,830	7.8
Technical sciences and engineering	46,841	30.9
Agriculture and forestry	6,431	4.2
Theology	998	0.6
Other	6,531	4.3
Total	151,615	100.0

Source: National Statistical Institute (1995).

Table 5
The Structure of Higher Education Enrollment, by Field, in 1999/2000 in Bulgaria

Fields of education / professional areas	Students at universities and specialized institutes				Students at colleges			
	Percent	Total	<i>of which:</i>		Percent	Total	<i>of which:</i>	
			Women	Full-time			Women	Full-time
Total	100.0	232,245	133,163	155,085	100.0	18,172	11,821	12,041
Teacher Preparation and Pedagogical Studies	11.5	26,639	20,482	15,481	3.2	590	519	590
Art	2.0	4,729	2,850	4,404	-	-	-	-
Humanities	7.5	17,486	12,575	13,801	0.4	75	22	49
Social Sciences	12.5	29,027	17,643	19,333	15.9	2,893	2,143	965
Journalism and Information	0.7	1,589	1,298	806	3.8	687	525	426
Economic Management and Administration	23.0	53,422	32,842	27,558	16.6	3,027	2,006	955
Law	5.5	12,685	7,586	7,590	-	-	-	-
Natural Sciences	0.5	1,261	866	948	-	-	-	-
Technical Studies	15.7	36,480	13,699	27,217	23.3	4,229	1,494	2,954
Informatics	1.8	4,120	2,115	3,514	-	-	-	-
Physical Sciences	1.8	4,176	2,395	3,429	-	-	-	-
Mathematics	0.6	1,526	827	1,464	-	-	-	-
Production and Processing	1.9	4,402	2,169	3,004	1.6	284	170	272
Architecture and Construction	2.4	5,497	2,311	4,497	0.3	50	6	24
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery	1.5	3,621	1,554	2,676	1.5	266	110	127
Veterinary Medicine	0.6	1,390	597	1,390	-	-	-	-
Medical Studies	2.0	4,779	2,747	4,538	23.9	4,343	3,694	4,343
Social Work	1.4	3,293	2,567	1,353	1.1	208	201	208
Tourism, Food and Sport	2.0	4,701	2,754	3,411	8.4	1,520	931	1,128
Transport	0.3	784	205	474	-	-	-	-
Environment	1.4	3,377	2,083	2,520	-	-	-	-
Security and Military Sciences	3.0	6,996	860	5,412	-	-	-	-
Other	0.1	265	138	265	-	-	-	-

Source: National Statistical Institute (2000).

Table 6
The Structure of Enrollment in Higher Education, by Degree and Field, 1998/1999 – 2001/2002, in Bulgaria

(percent)

Fields of Education	Specialist			Bachelor and Master			Doctor		
	1998/99	2000/01	2001/02	1998/99	2000/01	2001/02	1998/99	2000/01	2001/02
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Teacher Preparation and Pedagogical Studies	7.3	3.2	3.2	12.4	11.2	9.4	4.7	4.7	9.0
Art	0.3	-	-	2.0	2.3	2.4	3.2	3.3	3.9
Humanities	0.7	0.6	0.6	7.8	7.5	7.3	13.4	14.3	12.6
Social Sciences	9.5	13.6	14.1	10.8	12.5	12.9	3.3	4.2	4.6
Journalism and Information	3.2	4.2	4.1	0.7	0.8	0.6	0.4	0.3	0.2
Economic Management and Administration	18.2	16.1	14.6	22.5	21.3	21.9	11.6	12.9	13.6
Law	-	-	-	5.8	5.7	5.3	1.2	1.7	2.0
Natural Sciences	-	-	-	0.6	0.7	0.6	5.1	3.9	4.4
Technical Studies	16.6	23.5	24.3	14.6	16.3	17.5	18.5	20.1	17.0
Informatics	-	-	-	1.3	1.9	2.2	-	-	-
Physical Sciences	-	-	-	2.0	1.7	1.6	13.1	11.9	10.8
Mathematics	-	-	-	0.8	0.6	0.5	4.4	3.6	3.7
Production and Processing	0.9	2.0	2.2	1.4	2.0	2.1	1.2	1.7	1.7
Architecture and Construction	0.1	0.4	0.4	2.3	2.7	2.8	1.6	1.6	1.6
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery	1.0	1.7	3.8	1.7	1.5	1.5	3.0	2.7	2.5
Veterinary Medicine	-	-	-	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.2	0.3	0.2
Medical Studies	30.9	23.4	20.7	4.1	3.5	3.5	11.7	10.4	9.6
Social Work	0.1	0.8	0.6	1.4	1.2	1.2	-	-	-
Tourism, Food and Sport	7.4	9.6	10.7	2.1	2.0	2.2	-	-	-
Transport	1.0	0.9	0.6	0.4	0.7	0.8	1.4	1.2	1.1
Environment	-	-	-	1.0	1.2	1.2	0.5	1.0	1.1
Security and Military Sciences	2.5	-	-	3.3	1.9	1.4	1.4	0.6	0.6
Other	0.2	-	-	0.2	0.2	0.1	-	-	-

Source: National Statistical Institute (2002).