



Republic of Bulgaria
ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

OPINION

on

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING ISSUES IN BULGARIA

(on its own initiative)

Sofia, 23 November 2005

On 30 March 2005 the Plenary Session of the Economic and Social Council took decision to draw up and adopt on its own initiative an Opinion on Vocational Education and Training Issues in Bulgaria.

The Commission on Social Policy and the Commission on Labour, Incomes, Standard of Living, and Industrial Relations that had been responsible for the preparation of the Opinion approved a draft of the Council's Opinion on 25 October 2005.

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The Economic and Social Council approved this Opinion at its Sixteenth Plenary Session, held on 23 November 2005.

I. INTRODUCTION

The globalization process and information technologies “boom” laid along a number of key challenges to the prosperity of United Europe. At the same time, there were open some new and until now unsuspected possibilities.

In the name of the common European future, the European Union is supposed to respond to the changes. This is the reason for starting the most important project in Europe for economic and social reforms, the well-known Lisbon Strategy. Thus, United Europe clearly declared its ambition to get the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world until 2010, capable to maintain a high and sustainable economic growth, with a high rate of employment and social cohesion provided.

The European Union, being fully conscious of the role of the information, technologies, new knowledge and skills for the progress of modern civil societies, definitely underlined the extreme importance of the education for a successful termination of the socio-economic renovation process.

Such a circumstance is not only revoking radical reforms of the European economies. In the name of the progress, a fundamental transformation of the educational systems is also needed. This was expressly stated during the European Council’s meeting in Lisbon.

The process of the vocational education and training systems modernisation has the statute of a particular priority, within the course of the educational reforms.

The Lisbon Strategy has dedicated an important place to the vocational education and training (VET). A joint statement of the European ministers of vocational education and training and the European Commission was not in vain put down in the declaration of 29-30 November 2002, well-known as the Copenhagen Declaration, and as follows:

“Developing a high quality education and training is a decisive and integral part of this strategy, especially from view point of the social inclusion promotion, cohesion, mobility, suitability for employment and competitiveness”¹.

Today, despite the fact that the educational systems in the Member States are most developed and probably the European citizens are among the most educated in the world, all the Member States share the same concept that the high quality vocational education and training is, and it will further be, one of the basic preconditions for existing and reproducing qualified and adaptive labour force, capable for more and better creations through an intensive use of the new information technologies. In addition, expected high growth, productivity, effective

¹ “The Copenhagen Declaration”, Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission, convened in Copenhagen on 29 and 30 November on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training, p.1;

structural changes, significant investments, accelerated innovation process, promotion of entrepreneurship and employment would be impossible without reforms of the educational systems, in a way to provide and regularly disseminate knowledge and skills required by the economy.

Processes described above should have a great importance for the future of Bulgaria. The long-expected decision for termination of the accession negotiations between our country and the European Union, has been taken in December 2004, during the European Council's meeting in Brussels. Thus, on January 1st, 2007, the Bulgarian society integration to the big European family will be well-deserved and the opportunity for its contribution to building a New Europe, will be provided.

In this respect, modernisation of educational systems and of systems for vocational education and training should be transformed into one of the most important political assignments.

Unfortunately, Bulgaria is still staying so far from the achievements of the Member States and is facing challenges of difficult solution.

First, Bulgaria is not yet able to come over its economic lagging-behind. According to data of the National Statistical Institute, the country is only now hardly reaching the GDP volume from the beginning of the changes. First of all, this means limited resources for implementing desired and necessary policies. Low rates of social wealth are the basic reason for keeping back the public funds in the educational area, at the rate of 3.8% of the GDP for 2002, 3.9% for 2003, 4.1% for 2004, compared with the average rate of about 5.5 – 6% in the Member States².

Second, the Bulgarian economy is still not enough competitive. According to the information of Eurostat, GDP generated by each person employed is slightly over 30% from the average rate for EU-25. This requires simultaneous realisation of two interrelated processes – accelerated implementation of new technologies and sound investments in human resources.

Third, the structure of the Bulgarian economy is not yet responding to the requirements of the knowledge based economy. There are still prevailing low-tech economic activities. According to data of Eurostat for 2003, only 0.48% of the employed persons are working in high-tech industries, 2.69% – in high-tech services by performing complex labour activities. As compared, the part of employed in EU-25 is respectively 1.17% and 3.19%.

Forth, among all the Member States and those applying for membership in the European Union, Bulgaria is the country of the lowest employment rate. It is at the critical rate of 43.7%³.

² Information source – Ministry of Finance of Bulgaria and Eurostat;

³ Information source, National Statistics Institute for the survey of the labour force of 2004;

Fifth, issues mentioned above have been reproduced due to a dramatic demographic crisis in the Bulgarian society, even deeper since the beginning of the nineties of 20th century. The Economic and Social Council recognized demographic problems in its opinion⁴ and has drawn the attention of the civil society towards expected dangerous consequences, namely towards the following:

- natality crisis should lead to insufficiency of number of young generations, to disturbance of natural balance between the dimension of different generations;
- due to low birth-rate, even lower number of Bulgarian students enter the schools. According to the information provided by the National Statistics Institute, during five years only, since 1999 the number of children in the educational system has decreased by 150 000 approximately. This is an extremely disturbing trend, which could lead to a fully impossible reproduction of the Bulgarian society, including the impossible reproduction of the labour force, both in quantitative and qualitative aspects;
- the low living standard is the reason for larger economic migration, subsequences of which find expression in losses for Bulgaria of human capital, of young people at most active age. The other side of this process finds expression in irreversible loss of natality, education and qualification.

Sixth, the low living standard of the population is the main reason for the lower amount of resources invested by the Bulgarians in their own development. Information proves that in 2004, money allotted for free time, entertainment and education represents 3,7% only from the total household expenditures⁵. Only 3.5% of the active population, at the age between 25 and 64 years, continue participating in some form of education or training.

The Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria, after giving an account of the circumstances mentioned above and taking into consideration:

- upcoming membership of Bulgaria in the European Union;
- necessity of active inclusion of Bulgaria in the process of economic and social renovation of Europe;
- leading position assigned by the European Union to the vocational training and education, in the course of the economic and social reforms;
- necessity of drastic increase of competitiveness of the Bulgarian economy, through some more active implementation of new, modern information technologies in the industrial process;
- necessity of improvement of functioning and modernisation of the vocational education and training systems, in order to be integrated to existing practices in EU Member-States;
- necessity of awareness and sustainable implementation of the principle of life-long learning and vocational training for the Bulgarian society;
- traditions of many years and significant achievements of Bulgaria in the area of the vocational education and training, as well as

⁴ Economic and Social Council opinion on “Demographic development and challenges facing demographic policy in Bulgaria”, approved on 30.03.2005;

⁵ Info, NSI for the survey of households budget;

– leading position allotted to the education in the system of values of the Bulgarian citizens,

and in compliance of Art. 5, par. 4 and 5 of the Law for the Economic and Social Council,

the Council took a decision for designing **an opinion on the issues of the vocational education and training in Bulgaria.**

The Council underlines that this opinion is a result of a series of meetings and discussions organised by the ESC standing Commission on Labour, Incomes, Living Standard and Industrial Relations, in co-operation with experts in the area of the vocational education and training. It is also a result from the discussions held with the Joint Consultative Committee / EU-Bulgaria.

Opinions and proposals of employers organisations and trade unions, as well as a series of proposals of national institutions and institutions of the European Union, concerning vocational education and training issues, have been taken into account in discussions.

The opinion of the Council is aiming to draw the attention of society and state authorities towards the vocational education and training issues and probable possibilities for their solution.

II. MAIN ACTUAL ISSUES OF THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Developing and modernizing the vocational education and training system (VET)⁶ is the basis of prosperity of Bulgaria and its successful integration to United Europe. In a long-term plan, these reforms should provide conditions for complete utilisation of existing human capital in every society. Following the recommendations of the European Council, this means:

- **Improvement of quality and effectiveness of the vocational training and education systems**, in response to requirements of the information society;
- **Facilitating access to the vocational training and education systems for every body**, with view to eliminate traditional barriers and to implement the principle of life-long learning;

⁶ In this opinion 'vocational education and training' **should be perceived as every activity undertaken by the people with regard to acquire knowledge and skills and to set up necessary and important relations, from view point of every body's possibility to be included in the accomplishment of some group of activities leading to acquisition of some qualification.** In this respect, **the vocational training and education system includes: vocational education, vocational training and vocational guidance.** Vocational education provides awareness of minimum general education subjects during the course of secondary education and acquisition of qualification by profession. Vocational training provides the acquisition of qualification by profession or part of profession and also provides professional improvement. Vocational guidance provides information, consulting and advising of students and other persons on making their choice of profession and carrier development. **Vocational guidance, vocational training and vocational education are carried out by professions and subjects**, included in the List of professions for vocational education and training. **Professions and subjects are classified by vocational categories and by educational degrees and degrees of vocational qualification;**

– **Opening of the vocational training and education systems to global trends** for improvement of their attractiveness and potential⁷.

This is of great importance for the **economy of Bulgaria** and also for meeting the needs of competitiveness improvement, creating more flexible labour market, promoting professional and territorial mobility, estimating entrepreneurial spirit, as well as for the **Bulgarian citizens**, for their easier and painless adaptation to the structural changes of the economy, in view of providing possibilities for realisation in new areas, for improving their motivation to permanent improvement of their personal knowledge and skills, which means that every body will be able to realise own potential, whether being a member of the society or economic agent.

Definitely, and as it was reported during the Meeting of the Joint Consultative Committee / EU-Bulgaria dedicated to the vocational training and education issues⁸, despite of its traditions of many years and significant progress in the following areas:

- creation of quite adequate legislative framework;
- building of institutional network;
- providing flexibility of the vocational training and education system;
- intensifying of the process of optimization of the vocational training system;
- increasing the interest to the vocational training and education;
- implementation of the vocational training and education in school curricula of high schools;
- providing a basis for renewal of correlation between the vocational training and education system and the labour market,

the vocational training and education system in Bulgaria is facing serious problems and challenges. Some of these are problems of the present day and extremely important.

1. Major problem faced not only by the vocational education and training system, but also by the educational system in Bulgaria as a whole, is the **insufficient financing**. As to the vocational education and training system, even though the expenditure amount is increasing, this is still standing very small. According to the information provided by the National Agency of Vocational Education and Training (NAVET), public funds for vocational education (ISCED 2, 3 and 4 qualification degrees), consist of only 1,4% of the total public funds. This is a very small part, considering the fact that public expenditures for education consist of approximately 9,6% of the total public expenditures. **Obviously, the Bulgarian State Authorities haven't yet correctly evaluated the role of the vocational education and training for the future prosperity of the economy and society.**

⁷ European Council, "The concrete future objectives of education and training systems", Outcome of Proceedings, 14 February 2001;

⁸ Report by Dr. Docho Lazarov on "Vocational education and training – key factor a successful transition to knowledge based economy and society". This report has been presented and discussed in the 13th Meeting of the Joint Consultative Committee / EU-Bulgaria, held on 17 and 18 October 2005 in Sofia;

2. **Strong decentralization** is another disadvantage of the Bulgarian vocational education and training system. Main source of financing is the state budget, with some small exceptions when funds have been provided by the municipalities. According to the information of the National Agency of Vocational Education and Training (NAVET), in 2003, public expenditures for ISCED 2, 3 и 4 vocational education degrees, consist of 191,3 million BGN approximately – it is 211 times more than private expenditures in the system amounting to a little bit more than 904 000 BGN.

3. From the school year 1998/1999 to 2003/2004, the number of vocational education schools has decreased from 555 to 496. As a rule, this process is related considerable progress regarding the optimisation of the vocational education schools network. It is also true that **the process of optimization has started without previously laying the goals, the tasks and indicators reporting its effectiveness.** These are still missing.

4. **Material and technical equipments, not responding to the requirements of the school process,** are one of the main features of the vocational education and training system. It is not a secret that narrow specialization and practical purposefulness of the vocational education and training system are defining strong dependence of the school process on the existence of relevant economic conditions. However, due to permanently reproducing deficit of financial resources, as well as due to the optimisation of the vocational education and training system and the privatization process, the number of vocational education schools has been strongly reduced and many of the production areas, shops and laboratories adjoining existing schools, have been closed or privatised. Thus, school process has been reduced to school workshops, which led to a strong decrease of the education quality. Additional impact has been given also by the **insufficient dissemination of information and communication technologies in vocational education schools.**

5. Because of circumstances mentioned above, **vocational education programmes have got prevailing theoretical purposefulness,** mostly putting the stress on information transmission and even less on development of skills and real experience. Thus, vocational education schools became less competitive on the educational services market. As a result of this, students have been less prepared and after graduating they needed some additional training for their further realisation on the labour market.

6. **Deficit of text-books and school aids for the students on special subjects,** due to an inadequate system of writing, assessment, publishing and delivery of text-books, is a specific problem related to the quality of the vocational education.

7. **The system of practical training in vocational education schools has been neglected.** As mentioned above, this system has been applied only in the framework of the school-shops. Unfortunately, these school-shops result improperly equipped in most of the cases. Interrelation between vocational education schools and enterprises has been

irrevocably interrupted. This led to an impossible realisation of practical training in real production conditions.

8. Vocational education schools realise their activities on the basis of outdated syllabuses. They are oriented to vocational training systems, inadequate to the real conditions of the labour market, to some already non existing professions or professions which existence is not responding to knowledge based economy requirements.

9. The balance between different types of subjects of general and vocational education has been impaired. More importance has been given to vocational subjects than to subjects of general education. The excessively big number of vocational areas is other imperfection. Therefore, due to a particular specialization and relatively weaker general education preparation, graduate in vocational education schools face difficulties in case they would like to further continue their education in higher schools and universities system or to find realisation on the labour market cutting across their particular vocational education schooling.

10. The issue of knowledge and skills quality of trainers should not be depreciated. The role of the teachers has been seriously depreciated during the past years. Compared to all graduate in universities, teachers are sweated and have the lowest professional status. Career development of these specialists is not promoted by adequate financial reward. There is not an organised integral system for training teachers on different vocational subjects. Teachers in vocational education schools are not at present provided with necessary time and financial incentives for updating their knowledge and skills in the area of teaching. Most of them have been deprived of physical possibility because of being lack of opportunities for training on the spot. At present, training without discontinuing work is possible in three Bulgarian settlements only.

11. There is missing a unique and functioning system for assessment of education quality in vocational and secondary schools.

12. The most important problem is the lack of systems of research and forecasts not only for the future but also for the actual needs of the labour market. Actually existing initiatives have emerged sporadically and the result is a discrepancy between admitted for education by professions and real need of the economy. Created vocational structure is not responding to the requirements of the labour market. There is a discrepancy between the qualification of graduates from vocational education schools and real opportunities for starting work by acquired profession; that is to say that educational institutions “are producing” potential unemployed.

13. Despite the reported advancement and problems of the vocational education and training in secondary education mentioned above, it is worth underlining that the contribution of the higher education to developing the vocational education and training is extremely

insufficient. Symbolic is the existence of syllabus for the purposes of the vocational education and training in curricula of higher schools and universities. Due to lower interest of employers to this type of services and lower demand on behalf of potential trainees, **higher schools and universities ignore proposed educational services** for adults. A few universities are only proposing short term syllabus in centres for continued education, in so called centres for post-graduate training. The distance learning network is not enough developed. The learning through Internet is completely missing. In addition to this, a detailed data basis is missing, neither for reporting the exact number of users of this kind of services nor for the kind of educational services for adults proposed by higher schools and universities. This is the reason for not existing at all of any possibility for evaluation of higher schools contribution for implementing the life-long learning, for designing adequate policies, strategies, measures, as well as adequate analysis, forecasts and recommendations.

14. **Technical sciences represent the lowest part in the system of the higher education**, although they comprehend most of the vocational education areas. The number of students in technical sciences is lower than in social sciences, economic management and administration. Students in social sciences represent the half of the total number of studying in higher schools and universities, compared to 30% in EU-25. The system of higher education is only providing limited possibilities for obtaining extensive knowledge, skills and higher educational degree, but it is not providing any contribution to familiarization with some specific professional terminology; foreign languages learning in universities gears towards some basic linguistic knowledge. Obviously, university admission is under the terms of supply instead of demand and it is not depending on future and actual needs of the labour market. Indicative is the fact that one in five registered unemployed of university degree has graduated in socio-economic or law subjects.

15. An **extremely contradictory situation is created by the educational qualification degree of ‘specialist in...’** with no equivalent in the EU. Undoubtedly, there should be made some changes of colleges’ status in the context of institutional plans, regarding their insignificant contribution to the higher education supply (comprehending less than 7% of students in the higher education system in 2003/04⁹).

16. **In practice, vocational education and training in higher schools and universities is provided in absence of real practical training.** Practical trainings or so called ‘apprenticeships’ are still in the sphere of the good wishes. Most of the students have never been plugged in real labour process atmosphere.

17. **Knowledge and skills acquired in the higher educational system are not of adequately high quality.** There are two reasons for fostering this negative process. First, **we lack an adequate evaluation system of the product created in the higher education schools.** Institutional assessments given by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency evaluate the quality according to parameters and indicators related and registered

⁹ Info source National Statistical Institute;

in the process of training. This means that indicators are purely technological and their observing is a prerequisite and precondition for quality of the education, without being an identification of the quality. Second, **the conjuncture of the educational market has no impact on higher schools for reaching high quality educational standards.** There has been openly expressed opinions that higher education in Bulgaria has been transformed into a trade of diplomas and it is not representing a competitive environment for achieving a high quality education.

18. Perhaps, we could say that **higher education schools are closed conservative systems.** Their incapability to provide students with apprenticeship programmes in real environment proves that their relations with the labour market and economic operators have been almost broken. In addition, being strongly independent from state aid, these schools are neither using opportunities for funding from foreign sources. Although taking advantage by virtue of the law of tax concessions in import of technical equipment, software, textbooks and manuals, etc. for scientific research purposes, most of the Bulgarian universities have disregarded their function of research centres, generators of scientific discoveries, innovations and new practical trainings. Thus, the conclusion is that the universities in Bulgaria differ in no way from elementary and secondary education institutions which rely on state aid only and they don't appreciate any other funding opportunities, for example from researching projects. Prevailing conclusion is that these institutions offer a product of suspicious quality, entirely lacking practical relevance and using old methodologies of teaching. Changes of the status quo would be difficult because of the low interest presented by higher schools towards EU programmes like Leonardo da Vinci and Socrates programmes. These programmes are the best source of obtaining information on the best practices and they are the most appropriate basis for international co-operation and exchange of experience. The number of students and teachers from Member States who have visited universities of other countries is one of the most important indicators proving sociability of their educational systems. Unfortunately, such data are not available in our country.

19. Consequently, **vocational education and training in higher schools and universities is not attractive,** for two reasons at least. Firstly, **vocational education and training, so far as it goes, could not guarantee any realisation on the labour market.** Graduates from higher schools and universities reasonably face a big risk of being left without a job, because at present many employers don't yet need specialists with university degree. The Bulgarian economy, being of low technological level, is not making demands for particularly qualified specialists. Moreover, 98% of the enterprises are micro and small companies where very often the only one university graduate is the owner of the company. Secondly, due to financial dependence and conservativeness, universities could not provide good **material base, methods of teaching are exhausted, there is no new knowledge and possibilities for high quality foreign languages learning and computer literacy training by using specialized software for acquiring practical skills in real conditions.** Taking into consideration the low living standard of majority of the population and big expenses needed to be invested in higher education, it could be assumed that under other equal

conditions in the future, the universities shall further be losing positions on the market of services in the area of the vocational education and training. If occasion should demand extended qualification, priority shall be given to smaller, flexible, adaptive vocational training centres, much more open to the labour market tendencies.

20. Vocational training centres are a fundamental element of the EU concept for implementation of the continuing vocational education and training (VET) principle¹⁰. Unfortunately, **the vocational education and training centres network in Bulgaria is not enough developed and there are significant faults in training organisation and quality.**

21. **The principle of life-long learning has a low popularity among Bulgarian citizens.** According to data of Eurostat, in 2003 only 1,4% of the Bulgarian population of age between 24 and 64 years participated in education and training, compared to the average of 9,0% for EU-25 and the objective stipulated in the Lisbon Strategy for 2010 is 12,5%.

22. As a rule, enterprises are the most active subjects in demand of services in the area of the vocational education and training. But in our country, **most of the enterprises are not taking part in such trainings.** Usually, surviving under the terms of increased competitiveness and reduced demand is their major concern. Investment in human resources is receding into the background. Comparative analysis of Eurostat from 1999 proves that the relative share of Bulgarian enterprises which have realised continuing vocational education is at least 28%, compared to the relative share of between 70 and 96% in more of the Western European states and between 37 and 69% in Central and Eastern Europe. In 2002 at least 34,5% of the enterprises organised vocational training for their employees. Most preferred form of education is the training in the process of work and very often it includes self-training, short-term training courses, seminars, etc. But employees are not able to afford self-payment for such services. According to data provided by the National Statistical Institute, this is the reason that in 2004 only 8,9% of all employed between 25 and 64 years old participated in some kind of education or training.

23. Other reason for such a passive position is that **employers lack information related to possibilities provided by the Labour Code and the Employment Promotion Act.** Heavy bureaucratic procedures are further increasing this lack of interest.

24. **A weakly developed system of vocational guidance and consulting** is the reason for the insufficient information provided to employers. According to data of the National Agency of Vocational Education and Training (NAVET), in 2003 in the country were functioning only

¹⁰ In the EU continuing vocational education means some kind of education for updating and improving fundamental knowledge and skills acquired in formal schooling system, in order to support individuals in obtaining better and higher qualification for being more competitive in the labour market and further developing of carrier. In Bulgaria this kind of education is usually perceived as short-term training courses or continuing education for qualification improvement for short-term purposes, as for example, on the basis of current requirement of the labour market.

11 centres of vocational information, 4 centres of vocational information and consulting and 39 Job Clubs, with specialized activities on local level.

25. Despite the existing legislation, approved Vocational Education Strategy, Continuing Vocational Education Strategy, Concept of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy for life-long learning, training courses for unemployed organised by the National Employment Agency and programmes implemented by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, **the contribution of the State in the process of the vocational education and training modernization is insufficient. There are dozens of normative documents creating conditions for legislative chaos. Adopted documents are isolated from each other; there is no clear vision on the development of the educational system as a whole. There are even no Rules of implementation of the Vocational Education and Training Act, reliable mechanisms for efficiency assessment of programmes and required differentiation approaches for definition of measures.** Approaches are quite undiversified for most of the groups of unemployed and they don't take into consideration any kind of differences, in particular of age, sex, ethnicity, unemployment duration, educational status, disabilities, etc... **A very few number of organised training courses have been designed for employed persons,** notably micro and small companies face difficulties in organizing training for their staff.

26. **The State is not putting enough efforts in promoting the life-long learning principle. There is no system for assessment and acknowledgement of the education.** Implementation of such a system is of huge importance, because Bulgarian citizens need to be motivated in putting their own efforts for improving their knowledge and skills. When investment in national human capital is a priority of national governments, final results should be useful not only for separate economic entities but also for any particular individual. That is why there should be conditions encouraging **the contribution of every party involved in the axis of "state – business – citizens"**.

27. Obviously, vocational education and training issues in Bulgaria are extremely complicated and **their solution should not allow one-sided approach. The State could not and it should not be able to assume entire responsibility, because in general, the State would not be capable of correctly identifying the issues, the risks and the effects. Policies, strategies, measures and planning should consider the opinion of all directly or indirectly concerned.** This means **active involvement of the social partners in the process of development and modernization of the vocational education and training system.**

The European Union has correctly identified the leading position of social partners:
"The social partners play an urgent role in developing, improving and acknowledging vocational competences and qualifications on each level and they are partners supporting strengthened co-operation in this area"¹¹.

¹¹ "The Copenhagen Declaration", Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission, convened in Copenhagen on 29 and 30 November on enhanced European co-operation in vocational education and training, p.2;

Despite the fact that tripartite co-operation is stipulated in the Bulgarian legislation as a fundamental principle in the area of industrial relations and social policy, **the idea of social dialogue has been disregarded, a passive position has been assigned to social partners, there is no clear vision on their specific commitments to solve the vocational education and training problems.**

III. MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Economic and Social Council has expressed through this opinion its commitment not only to the vocational education and training issues, but also to the Bulgarian educational system as a whole. With regard to issues mentioned above, the Economic and Social Council considers that Bulgaria could not further presume bad appreciation of the role of the education in its future development.

According to the Council, urgent and pressing measures for solving the emerged unfavourable circumstances are needed. The Economic and Social Council proposes that these measures are implemented as follows:

- 1. The National Assembly**, on the highest state level with the active participation of all parties concerned, **should approve a National Concept on the national human capital.** This concept shall put at the foreground the leading place of the education for the future prosperity of Bulgaria.
- 2. A long-term National Strategy for the Development of the Education in Bulgaria where priority guidelines for further development of all educational levels**, shall be approved on the basis of the National Concept on the national human capital.
3. The National Strategy in the area of the vocational education and training shall be implemented on the basis of mid-term **National Action Plans**, drafted by the Ministry of Education and Sciences in co-operation with all responsible ministries and approval of the civil society representatives. National Action Plans should set short-term tasks and identify specific responsibilities of state authorities and social partners.
4. Monitoring on the National Action Plans completion should be made on the basis of **Annual Progress Reports**, drafted by groups of experts including representatives of the State, social partners, branch associations, civil society organisations. To that purpose, the National Assembly should also approve **a system of indicators for measuring of the progress.**
5. The Annual Progress Report shall be submitted to **a Round Table on Education Issues**, specially organised by the Ministry of Education and Sciences for discussing achieved progress, for specifying new issues and for proposing new solutions.

The Council is united around the following recommendations for improvement of the vocational education and training system efficiency:

1. To increase the allocation in the budget for education and also increase the fund portion for the vocational education and training system;
2. To design a system for identification, monitoring, analysis, forecasts of current and future needs of the labour market of labour force with specific knowledge and skills; to create and maintain information data base serving these needs; this data base should be transformed into a basis for formulating the school curricula, vocational areas and state-funded education;
3. To initiate a process of financial decentralization of the vocational education and training system in order to reduce dependence of the vocational education institutes on budget subsidiary and suspend expropriation of own incomes of the schools;
4. To create a system for external assessment of results achieved by vocational education institutes in order to escape breaking the principle of equal access to educational services;
5. To undertake measures for breaking the vicious trends to children's dropping out of the educational system;
6. To accelerate the process of implementation of information and communication technologies in schools; to improve the material and technical equipment in state vocational education institutes; thus institutes would be able to also participate more actively in offering education for adults;
7. To support vocational education institutes in their efforts to revive the traditions in practical training of students. This could be done by stimulating employers providing production shops and equipment for practical training and also admitting students for practical training;
8. To revise actual legislation in the area of the vocational education and training in order to be improved and developed for updating school curricula, for updating state funded education, for restructuring vocational education areas; to improve and specify requirement for acquiring vocational qualification degree on the basis of analysis of the characteristics and specifics of works related to each profession;
9. To disseminate and strengthen education and training on entrepreneurship by involving also teachers from the business;
10. To stop the process of devaluation of the professional and social status of teachers; to create a system of relevant material and non-material incentives so that teachers are not only motivated to perform their activity but also to make efforts for improving and promoting their carrier; to optimize the network of centres for improvement of teachers qualification; to create for the purposes of the vocational education and training a system for educational product's quality assessment;
11. To revise actual Classificatory of vocational areas in terms of making clearer vocational competences in education and qualification degrees, in particular, "bachelor" and "master" degrees;
12. To promote and stimulate higher education schools in developing scientific and research activities;
13. To revise the role of the degree "specialist on..." and the place of the colleges within the vocational education system; a possible solution would be their transformation into

specialized higher or secondary schools;

14. To improve institutional controlling of the higher education quality and namely on accreditation of subjects; to create objective system for assessment of the preparation quality (rating) in higher education schools; to implement a regulated voucher system in higher education;

15. To make a detailed analysis of existing vocational education system; to optimize existing system for licensing of centres for continuing vocational education so that only providers of high quality services shall have access to the market, as well as in order that participation of private and non-governmental organisations in offering training for adults becomes more active;

To realise changes in legislation so that education and training in professions, requirements for which have been stipulated in international documents and in the European legislation and standards, as well as in national specialized acts. The right to exercise these professions should be acquired under enforced specialized act. This suggests that the state education requirements for these professions should be approved together with the Ministry of Education and Science and by the relative specialized administration and the licensing of the vocational qualification centres, including the schools for vocational and higher education, for education in such professions should be performed solely by the competent specialized administration;

To implement legislation changes in order to provide equal access to state funds, related to vocational education and training system, of all vocational qualification centres despite the licensing order and their property;

15. To create more effective incentives for employers implementing continuous vocational training for their employees; more substantial alleviations for employers' involvement into the funds for voluntary insurance for unemployment and vocational qualification;

16. To intensify and improve the current network of centres for vocational training that should provide reliable information regarding the opportunities for education and training, as well as the requirements of the labour market;

17. To make the active policies more efficient; to develop the capacity of the National Employment Agency as a part of the entire strategy for social inclusion of unemployed and providing a long-lasting employment; this includes an increase and diversification of number of training activities for unemployed;

18. To encourage and stimulate of employers' organizations, trade unions and other NGOs for more active participation during the process of vocational training and increase of the qualification of employed and unemployed, including:

- creation of branch centers for acquiring, maintaining and increasing qualification on the current professional occupation and for acquiring qualification of another professional occupation;

- creation and development of branch and regional funds for qualification;

- organization of training forms without interruption of the working process;

19. To create a procedure for acknowledge of the acquired qualification through informal training, for periodically assessing of employed and current qualification.

The Economic and Social Council considers that the practical implementation of these recommendations shall lead to the realization of a **strategic approach for development and up-dating of Bulgarian education system in compliance with the requirements of the information society and common concepts and practices in the EU Member-States. The vocational education and training deserve a special attention within this approach.**