



Republic of Bulgaria
ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

RESOLUTION

on

"AN INTEGRATED POLICY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN BULGARIA"

(own-initiative resolution)

Sofia, 2015

The Action Plan for 2015 of the Economic and Social Council included the elaboration of a resolution on the topic

"An integrated policy for young people in Bulgaria".

At its meeting held on 17 December 2015 the Plenary Session adopted the resolution.

I. VISION FOR AN INTEGRATED POLICY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

1. The problems of young people in Bulgaria are a key priority in the activities of the Economic and Social Council (ESC). ESC has devoted a number of its major acts to these issues. The concrete topics include the family and responsible parenting, early school leaving, education, professional development and the realization of young people in the labour market. ESC has also organized a number of regional consultations and discussions focusing on specific territorial youth problems.
2. ESC believes that the issues of young people are a key factor for the future socio-economic development, as well as a serious challenge to this development.
 - 2.1. In several acts ESC focuses on the very serious negative demographic trends in the country which will have a major impact on social security systems and the labour market. Particularly disturbing in this regard are statistics on the declining number of contingents of young people and advancing process of aging of the Bulgarian population. In this regard, along with any increased age dependency ratio, ESC addresses with particular concern the problem of deteriorating quality of human capital and in particular with respect to the young generation.
 - 2.2. ESC has also attracted public attention to the very serious problem of migration of young people and particularly after completing secondary education. Besides migration abroad ESC has also considered the serious challenge of inward migration, which is a prerequisite and already results in the emerging processes of depopulation of certain areas in the country.
3. ESC finds that finding good employment and having access to the labour market remain the major problem for young people. The increasing differences in this respect between young people with higher education and those without education is indicated by ESC as one of the most serious problems in the medium and long term.
 - 3.1. Comparative analyses within the European Union (EU) convincingly show that in Bulgaria the employment rate of young people with primary or lower education is several times lower than the EU average and in practice these contingents of young people in the country are doomed to permanent isolation and exclusion from the labour market.
 - 3.2. There are disturbing data on student performance represented in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which show that 15-year-old Bulgarian students come last in the EU in literacy.
 - 3.3. In the study conducted by ESC of the migration attitudes of secondary school graduates in 2015 every fourth student indicated as a major problem in their settlement the poor quality of education.
4. ESC has found warning signs in the indicators of children's health and the way of life of a majority of them related to unhealthy diet, smoking, alcohol abuse, drug addiction, etc.
5. ESC is convinced of the need for the implementation of multi-sectoral youth policy,

enshrined in the "National Youth Strategy 2010-2020", and accepts the thesis that responsibility for the youth policy of the state is not limited to one institution or structure.

6. Therefore, ESC believes that there is need for a new vision for youth policy in Bulgaria that brings together and integrates all targets, resources, institutions and measures for young people to ensure lasting positive effect in the long term.
7. ESC considers that such a policy will be effective only when it includes an integrated approach between health care and child protection, development of an educated young generation, decent realization in the labour market, and policies on the regulation of migration processes.
8. ESC appreciates the efforts of the legislative and executive branches and acknowledges the challenges that delay the necessary reforms, but believes that it is necessary in the planning and implementation of measures related to youth policy all institutions whose activities have an impact on the lives of young people in the country, as well as the local authorities, should adopt a cross-sectoral approach. Integrated policy should include tools enriched based on the experience of other member states in dealing with the problems of young people.
9. The main goal to which the efforts of governments, social partners and civil society organizations should be directed is to develop a common framework of measures for the younger generation (educational, training, qualification, social, etc.), classified as stages of intervention according to the development of the individual.
10. It is necessary for this framework to provide a wide range of measures, incl. schemes for their financing, from which the government at the district (and even at the municipal) level can choose in order to respond as efficiently as possible to region-specific challenges. According to ESC, the same amount of public funds, but with a stronger regional emphasis in determining the measures, target groups and expected results can achieve a much more tangible effect than national policies.
11. ESC supports the planned activities of the administrations at the national, regional and local level included in the Implementation Plan of the National Youth Strategy (2010-2020) for 2015 and also welcomes the steps taken by the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS) to update the National Strategy for Youth for the period 2016-2020 with new tasks according to what is planned in the various sectoral policies.
12. At the same time, ESC recognizes as a significant step forward on part of the state the proposed model for effective participation of young people in making important national decisions, which regulates the participation of representatives elected by youth organizations in special advisory bodies - the National Advisory Council for Youth and Social Council on Youth at the Ministry of Youth and Sports.
13. ESC expresses its support for the proposal to "create and implement a single, coherent and sustainable youth policy in Bulgaria, based on multi sector approach, cross-sectoral cooperation and joint management by young people at the national, regional, provincial and municipal levels"¹.

¹ Youth Report 2014 - Council of Ministers.

14. ESC welcomes the action taken by the Ministry of Youth and Sports for the development and implementation of a coordination mechanism, including the signing of a cooperation agreement between the main line ministries directly connected with the development of young people in Bulgaria. ESC believes that these actions will contribute to sustainability of the proposed action, better efficiency in the work of institutions, agencies and all other stakeholders interested in youth policy.
15. ESC is pleased to find that the main conclusions and proposals of the National Youth Report 2014 coincide with the views and recommendations made over the years in a series of its own acts.
16. In this regard, ESC proposes that the Deputy Prime Minister on Demographic and Social Policy should be responsible and should coordinate the effective implementation and financial provision of all planned actions and measures. Furthermore, ESC proposes that this approach to youth policy brings together different areas of intervention covering comprehensive and consistent problems surrounding the development of every young person to form an overall integrated policy for young people.

II. FAMILY POLICIES AND EFFECTIVE HEALTH CARE FOR MOTHERS AND CHILDREN

1. Considering the paramount role of the family and responsible parenthood, related to the upbringing and education of children, ESC has repeatedly expressed its position and has presented to the legislative and executive branches concrete proposals for policies and measures. ESC believes that it is imperative to create a comprehensive, high-quality strategy for state policy in the area of family, children and responsible parenthood by means of a thorough public debate. The critical state of problems requires urgent action.
2. ESC is seriously concerned about the demographic crisis and its expected impact on the reproduction of the population in the long term. Therefore, it has made concrete proposals and recommendations in its acts² related to: health care for children; education reform and quality education; income policy and support for families, promotion of responsible parenthood and penalties for irresponsible parents.
3. According to ESC, the state policy regarding the family and responsible parenthood should be coordinated and targeted, designed and implemented by the responsible state institutions at local, regional and national level.
4. With regard to supporting the family in caring for the children and promoting responsible parenthood, in its adopted acts ESC has made the following proposals:
 - 4.1. High-quality, accessible and free health care for mothers during the period of pregnancy and the pre-school age of the child;

² Opinions of the ESC: "Demographic Trends and Challenges Facing the Demographic Policy of Bulgaria"; "National Reform Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria".

- 4.2. Creating conditions for an accelerated transition to free kindergartens and the development of new childcare services for children under three years of age;
- 4.3. Encouraging employers in developing and implementing a set of policies aimed at: the reconciliation of work, private and family life and to career development for parents in the workplace by: flexitime, teleworking, parental leave, child support, corporate services for parents and families, etc.;
- 4.4. Introducing popular European forms of family taxation.
5. In the field of social assistance ESC's proposals are associated with the need to ensure comprehensive protection of family and children from economic, social and criminal risks and targeted measures for timely support for children experiencing risk conditions. It is also necessary to review the criteria for placement of children who have living parents with foster families.
6. Repeatedly in its acts ESC has recommended the development of specific policies and measures for children from the most vulnerable groups facing risk from various social, economic and ethnic factors. Guaranteeing the rights of these children according to ESC requires additional measures in a number of sectoral policies, education, health care, social inclusion, social assistance and others.
7. ESC appeals that the state policy for children and families should shift from social welfare to social investment in the new generations, their parents and families. Therefore, priority should be given to ensuring the access of all Bulgarian children and young people to good-quality education.
- 7.1. ESC supports the current position of the European Children's Network Eurochild,³ which notes that an important prerequisite for achieving sustainable and equitable economic and social development is putting the child at the centre of the investment strategy. Such a strategy should have as a priority investment in the following areas: education policy focused on early childhood development, health care, community development and strengthening of the family, social protection and welfare support.
8. Guided by the understanding that the status of the family and that of children can be significantly improved by increasing the quality of public healthcare, ESC has addressed its problems in a number of its acts⁴. In them ESC proposes the development of individual programmes to provide specialized medical care for children according to their condition and needs, encouraging the participation of NGOs in child care, better care for children in terms of prevention and the encouragement of prophylactics.

³ http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Eurochild_position_InvestmentPlan_FINAL.pdf.

⁴ Opinions on "Healthcare Reform"; "Updated Draft of the "National Healthcare Strategy for the Period 2008-2013" and "Healthcare in Bulgaria - Problems and Possible Solutions."

9. ESC believes that improving the health status of children can be achieved by taking targeted and effective measures, such as:
 - 9.1. Improving the quality of public healthcare and optimizing its structure;
 - 9.2. Health prevention and improvement of diagnosis and treatment through the implementation of European standards;
 - 9.3. Introducing a monitoring system to cover pregnant women and children for screening and improving the package of services provided to pregnant women;
 - 9.4. Substantial reduction of the phenomenon of "children having children";
 - 9.5. Improving knowledge of the younger generation not only in matters of sexuality and contraception, but also on family and parent partnership to take on the personal commitments and responsibilities associated with childbirth, childcare, nutrition and healthy behaviour;
 - 9.6. Ensuring prevention, diagnostics, treatment, physiotherapy and complex care for children with disabilities and special needs;
 - 9.7. Timely and good-quality healthcare, including dental services for children, including in schools and kindergartens;
 - 9.8. Ensuring joint efforts of many professionals - school and personal doctors, paramedics, nurses, school psychologists, parents and teachers to deal with the health issues among students, mainly caused by low physical activity, unhealthy diet, etc.;
 - 9.9. Providing opportunities for free sports at school, creation of state and municipal sports schools.
10. ESC believes that it is necessary to focus more efforts on the implementation of integrated preventive healthcare and the development of preventive programmes of national importance, involving national and representative organizations of employers and trade unions and NGOs.
11. In connection with the identified problems relating to the lack of the necessary link between medical specialists in schools and the personal doctors (GPs), ESC adopted an opinion on a draft law amending and supplementing the existing Healthcare Act (2007), which supported the proposal to restore school doctors and proposed that the relationships and interactions between GPs and medical specialists in schools regarding the healthcare of children should be regulated in a special piece of secondary legislation.
 - 11.1. Data from recent years show that there is an acute shortage of medical staff in schools, which is dictated both by the low pay and the lack of career prospects.
 - 11.2. ESC notes that since the adoption of the Healthcare Act 2007 there have been no changes in Regulation №3/2000 concerning the doctor's offices in kindergartens and schools. In this regard, ESC expresses satisfaction concerning its accepted proposal which was included in the draft "Regulation on the Structure and Activity of Doctor's Offices and Health Requirements for Them", which governs the relationship between the personal (family) doctors (GPs) and medical specialists from the doctor's

offices the kindergartens or schools, and the duties and responsibilities of medical professionals.

- 11.3. In connection with the shortage of medical specialists in Bulgaria ESC proposed⁵ to develop and to discuss a strategy for the management of human resources engaged in healthcare for the following 10-15 years. Both the strategy and its implementation plan must include all possible directions and mechanisms to provide the necessary human resource system, mechanisms to increase motivation, opportunities for specialization, etc., including healthcare in schools.
- 11.4. ESC is convinced that the effectiveness of healthcare in schools can be improved by introducing wider computerization, including comprehensive information for each person. Such a system would help to implement the connection between medical specialists in schools and personal doctors (GPs).
12. ESC believes that school age is the most important period in terms of opportunities for building personal skills and positive habits related to the preservation of one's health and therefore proposes:
 - 12.1. Promoting and developing health education programmes focusing on healthy diet and healthy lifestyles, tackling obesity, smoking and drugs alcoholism and stress;
 - 12.2. Establishing a system for monitoring and control of smoking and drug addiction among young people, especially among schoolchildren;
 - 12.3. ESC believes that the funds provided for in the Healthcare Act for restricting the use of tobacco products and alcoholic beverages, entering the state budget from excise duties on such goods, should be used more efficiently and targeted for carrying out preventive campaigns on the dangers related to them and their harmful effect on people's health.
13. ESC notes that there is a problem for young people associated with their status as insured persons in their transition from secondary to higher education. According to the Social Security Code, the social security and health insurance contributions for students are paid from the national budget until they turn 18 years of age, or until completion of secondary education. The social security and health insurance contributions for young people who continue their education at a university (full-time course of higher education) are also paid from the national budget until they turn 26 years of age.
14. At the same time, ESC found that during the months after the completion of secondary education until the beginning of their studies at a university (the period from July to September) the social security and health insurance contributions of young people remain uncovered from the state budget, which puts them at risk of losing their health insurance rights.

⁵ ESC opinion on "Healthcare in Bulgaria - Problems and Possible Solutions "

15. Once again, ESC expresses its confidence that for the implementation of policies relating to the family and effective healthcare for mothers and children it is necessary to adopt an integrated approach and coordinate the actions of the institutions working in the social sphere, healthcare and education.

III. EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

1. ESC in its acts and positions repeatedly stressed the need for further reforms in secondary, vocational and higher education and training, noting that the changes made so far have not completely solved the main problems facing the education system with regard to the needs of the labour market.
2. Driven by the realization that the knowledge and skills acquired as a result of education are a key factor for the integration or the exclusion from the labour market, ESC regards the problems of education and training as matters of high priority in its activity and has adopted a series of acts⁶ on the problems of education.
3. ESC restates its position that the crises in Bulgarian society, economy and value systems that have accompanied the historical processes in Bulgaria during the past 25 years, have affected negatively the quality of education as well as the public and financial support for it. Education has not established itself as a true national priority and is not sufficiently funded. Legislative and other regulatory changes are delayed or the government undertakes partial reforms in this sector that are unrelated to one another, and there are insufficient mechanisms for public control of education.
4. The ESC welcomes the adoption of a series of strategic documents⁷ that define national priorities in education and science. Some of these documents were the subject of separate acts or organized public discussions, by which ESC contributed to the achieved national consensus on the main priorities of the education reform: improving the quality of education and ensuring equal access to good-quality education.
5. ESC is concerned that at the beginning of the new programming period - 2014-2020, Bulgaria still lacks comprehensive legislation linked to ensuring compliance of the acquired knowledge, skills and competences with the requirements of the labour market, as well as sufficient realization of young people who have acquired professional qualifications.

⁶ ESC has adopted a number of specialized instruments on the topic: "The Problems of Vocational Education and Training in Bulgaria" and "The Education System in Bulgaria - Problems and Necessary Reforms", "Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving", the National "Draft Strategy for Preventing and Reducing Early School Leaving (2013 - 2020)", "Measures and Actions for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers", on "Draft Act for Amending and Supplementing the Vocational Education and Training Act", on "Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the Period 2014-2020".

⁷ National Programme for the Development of School Education and Pre-School Education (2006-2015); National Youth Strategy (2010-2020); Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities by 2015; National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014-2020); Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013-2020); National Strategy for the Development of Teaching Staff; Strategy for the Effective Implementation of ICT in Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria (2014-2020); Strategy for the Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2015- 2020.

- 5.1. In its acts ESC repeatedly recommended speeding up the reform of pre-school and secondary school education and welcomes the adoption of the new Pre-School and School Education Act that will change the model and approach in the education system.
 - 5.2. ESC proposes to consider the possibility of developing and adopting a new Vocational Education and Training Act that is consistent with the needs of the public.
6. Led by the understanding that education is an investment in human capital development and the basis upon which the successful economy is built, ESC recommends the development and implementation of an integrated policy with uniform objectives common to the entire educational system, including pre-school and school education, universities as well as continuing education and training.
- 6.1 In this context, ESC proposes to establish working coordination mechanism for initiation, adoption and implementation of such integrated policy in the field of education - which is to have the following aims:
- Integration of resources into a policy that is common to all institutions and centres on education as a tool for development of human capital, by promoting measures arising not only from the public sector but are the result of public-private partnerships or actions initiated by businesses and NGOs;
 - Participation of all stakeholders in the creation and implementation of an integrated educational policy that formulates a National Concept of the Human Capital of the Nation, adopted by the National Assembly, which would clearly define priority directions of development for all educational levels, supported by concrete national policies and measures;
 - Interrelations between secondary education, on the one hand, and between secondary and tertiary education, on the other;
 - Transformation of the education process around a core of practical skills and competencies necessary for economic development;
 - Changing public attitudes towards the teaching profession;
 - Building a supportive environment and supporting network services to support the educational system to work effectively for overcoming the serious problems, such as the scope and retention of children in schools, prevention of violence and aggressive behaviour, etc.;
 - Transparency in education management and building a unified information system for tracking the extent and development of children from entering the education system to graduation and their professional realization;
 - Balancing supply and demand in the labour market through better planning, early career guidance and counselling and aligning curricula with the recommendations of the business sector.
- 6.2. ESC supports the statutory principle introduced into the system of pre-school and school education related to "autonomy in conducting

educational policies self-government and decentralization"⁸regulating the educational process as initiative and responsibility of the school and the local authorities.

- 6.3. According to ESC, it is imperative to replace the prescriptive administrative functions of the state with regulatory control, providing administrative and financial powers of municipalities corresponding to their responsibility to develop regional education policies. This will ensure that the development and implementation of education policy at the local and regional level will take into account the needs of local businesses and will comply with parental and civic opinion.
7. In the course of the conducted discussions ESC found many difficulties in the field of pre-school education, including: difficult access to groups of compulsory pre-school education in many places, as well as insufficient or amortized premises and facilities.
8. Guided by the belief that the basic skills and habits of children are formed in pre-school education, ESC emphasises some of its recommendations:
 - 8.1. Assisting and supporting the transition of children from the family to the educational environment and improving the quality of their education to become a strategic priority of complex actions of local authorities, parents, NGOs and other stakeholders;
 - 8.2. A coherent information system which would allow the Ministry to gather information together with municipalities about the coverage of children in schools, which can then be analyzed and serve as the basis for adequate planning of measures and activities that contribute to achieving the national target "Increasing the share of children covered by preschool education and training from the age of 4 to entering the first grade of school to 90% by 2020."⁹.
 - 8.3. To encourage local authorities in the development of community programmes for the modernization of existing kindergartens and construction of new ones, as well as for early coverage of children /at the age of 3 and 4/ in kindergartens for early adaptation, socialization and learning the Bulgarian language.
9. ESC recommends that local authorities, together with schools, parents and local NGOs should develop and implement a set of measures for complex individual services for children and families. Such measures include, for example:
 - 9.1. Additional training for children with learning difficulties and for children whose mother tongue is other than Bulgarian;
 - 9.2. Applying all-day organization of the school day;
 - 9.3. Removal of fees in childcare facilities for mandatory preschool /at the age of 5 and 6/ and reducing the monthly fee for children up to 5 years of age;

⁸ Pre-School and School Education Act, adopted 30 September 2015

⁹ National Strategy for Lifelong Learning for 2014-2020

- 9.4. Increasing the participation and involvement of parents in the education process;
- 9.5. Creating information centres at the municipal community centres for parental education and awareness of the benefits of preschool education;
- 9.6. High-quality training for teachers through additional training to build skills for working in a multicultural environment.

IV. EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND REINTEGRATION OF DROPOUTS IN EDUCATION

1. ESC has repeatedly stated that one of the most important challenges facing schools is associated with early school leaving, which affects achieving the objective of the "Europe 2020" Strategy concerning "Early school leaving" among individuals aged between 18 and 24 with primary or lower education.
2. ESC characterizes the problem with early school leaving as one of the toughest problems of our society because it not only leads to serious economic, social and political consequences, but also to increasing the structural challenges facing the labour market in Bulgaria.
3. In recent years, ESC considered early school leaving in a number of acts¹⁰ and held public discussions on the topic with key stakeholders in regions where there is acute manifestation of this problem or there are best practices for solving it. Expertise on the topic was exchanged with the Spanish Economic and Social Council.
4. Guided by the belief that early school leaving is a factor leading to poverty, social exclusion and repeated periods of unemployment, and considering these consequences, the ESC proposed a number of specific measures aimed at country strategic papers¹¹ on the subject. In this regard ESC notes with satisfaction that many of them were accepted by the institutions included as leading policies and measures in the Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013-2020).
5. ESC supports the coordination and implementation mechanism provided for in the Strategy, which involves not only the educational system and the institutions in it, but also all state and municipal bodies and organizations responsible for providing better physical, financial and social protection of children. At the same time, ESC recommends that in the design of this mechanism it is necessary to implement an integrated institutional approach in the implementation of the Strategy to exercise effective control and transparency at all levels in terms of indicators to measure its performance and impact.

¹⁰ Opinion "Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving" and Resolutions: "Draft National Reform Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria", "Demographic Challenges Facing Bulgaria within the Europe 2020 Strategy", "Resolution on the Draft National" Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013-2020)", Resolution "Measures to Reduce the Share of Early School Leavers" and Analysis on "Early School Leaving".

¹¹ ESC Resolution on "Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013-2020)".

6. ESC welcomes the adopted national partnership agreement between stakeholders (institutions and organizations) on the implementation of the Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013-2020). The document includes actions for joint preventive measures and activities to cover and retain children and students in pre-school and school education and training to complete their education, with the possibility of acquiring professional qualification for the implementation of intervention measures addressed at school leavers, as well as to attract individuals who have never participated in the formal education system.
7. In its acts ESC proposed that in municipalities and schools with a predominant share of children and students at risk of early school leaving to develop a comprehensive approach for integrated policy-based prevention based on agreement to work together and designing a specific algorithm for interaction "school - students - parents - local government - local businesses - public organizations" with concrete commitments on part of schools (tutor, director, school psychologist), the student and parent to local departments for child protection and social welfare of local committees to combat delinquency of minors, local businesses, community centres and centres for community and social support.
8. ESC offers a range of preventive measures and incentives, which include:
 - Implementation of systems for early identification of children and students at risk of early school leaving as well as the reasons for this;
 - Implementation of new and more effective incentives for students at risk and their parents to regularly participate in the educational process;
 - Greater priority and attention, including additional activities for children, for whom the Bulgarian language is not their mother tongue;
 - Lightening educational content and introducing modern, attractive and interactive teaching methods;
 - Extending the range of pedagogical specialists by introducing specialists in "educational mediation" according to the national classification of occupations and positions;
 - Implementing measures with a social focus on students at risk of early school leaving after the age of 16. and providing free school transport until their graduation;
 - Support for the development of youth and children's organizations creating or expanding existing centres for children and disclosure of information centres in community centres for children and students;
 - Creation of public advisory boards (PAB) working at the municipal mayors and dealing with the problems of integration of pupils from ethnic minorities, which should include representatives of such ethnic communities.
- 9 ESC also proposes a set of restrictive disciplinary measures which include:
 - All legal obligations of municipal mayors to impose sanctions on parents under Art. 347 of the Pre-School and School Education Act, whose children do not attend compulsory pre-school and school education;
 - Imposing sanctions on parents who leave the country and leave their children unattended;

- Imposing sanctions on school principals who have allowed fictitious enrolment and support "hidden non-attendance" by excusing a large number of absences;
 - Regulating the rights of teachers, school boards and school management regarding possibilities for confrontation in the case of openly aggressive behaviour;
 - Additional incentives for children at greater risk of early school leaving related to the learning outcomes achieved by them;
10. ESC is seriously concerned that there is no reliable statistical methodology to provide reliable information about children who are not covered in the first grade, what happens to them and where they are.
 11. Taking into account the expected impact of these processes, ESC again draws attention to the urgency of undertaking additional measures for a more complete coverage of children in schools.
 - 11.1. According to ESC, it is necessary to urgently build a national database bringing together information gathered by all organizations and institutions. One of the related proposals of ESC concerns the introduction of "individual education number" for each student. ESC proposes on this basis to build a national register of students, providing constant reliable information about their movement within country and traceability of their educational status, in the context of coordinated and synchronized efforts of all stakeholders.
 - 11.2. In this regard, ESC supports the development and introduction by the Ministry of the early warning system and implementation of a coordination mechanism for its implementation and control. Moreover, ESC believes that there should be a mechanism for tracking in the unified register of the target group of those who "never attended school" and the introduction of electronic registration of children in kindergarten and first grade.
 - 11.3. According to ESC, it is necessary for institutions to unite their efforts to solve the problems associated with the tracking of students leaving the country with their parents and settling in another country. Creation of legal grounds for quick legalization of documents of students who have studied abroad is another problem requiring urgent solution.
 12. ESC draws attention to insufficient effective action to reintegrate in the educational process dropouts and early school leavers. There is a serious need for objective analysis and reevaluation adjustments of previously implemented policies and measures taken to reintegration into the education system.
 - 12.1. In this regard, ESC recommends to introduce and follow the single statistical register of the target group of "early school leavers" containing the following subgroups: primary school dropouts, pre-secondary education dropouts, as well as grouping by age groups and those reintegrated into education and training. This is a prerequisite for the implementation of systematic control and monitoring of all institutions.
 - 12.2. According to ESC, the success of the implementation of national policies

and measures for reintegration is not guaranteed in advance and requires joint efforts by schools, families and the communities in which dropouts live. This implies the application of coordination between the different institutions involved, and the application of integrated action at the national, regional and local level.

12.3. ESC recommends applying different sets of measures to individual target groups caught up in the register of early school leavers, such as:

- Measures relating to the provision of alternative learning environment (mainly for qualification), such as schools for "second chance" which could offer a tailored learning environment. Such measures are related to the preparation of individual curriculum, career guidance and involvement in vocational programmes and internships. The curriculum provided to the students should be flexible and tailored to the individual, but also to the local needs, with a strong focus on literacy, numeracy, personal development, healthy living, sport and professional skills;
- Complex measures linked to national programmes for "Reintegration of dropouts into the education system" aimed primarily at professional qualification to the validation of acquired skills and knowledge, combined with the involvement of young people in temporary employment programmes to prevent social exclusion;
- Organizing activities at the local level through the development of local programmes by municipalities, businesses and educational institutions. Such programmes should be aimed at "dual training" and focusing on opening more internships and apprenticeships, and motivating local businesses to create Vocational Training Centres (VTC).

V. SYSTEM OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

1. The problems related to the quality of vocational education and training (VET) in Bulgaria and the necessary legislative amendments have been the subject of ESC's attention since 2005. In one of its first opinions on the subject¹² ESC proposed developing a system for identifying, monitoring, analysis and prediction of current and future needs of the workforce, including specific knowledge and skills necessary for the labour market.
2. Led by the understanding that today's conditions require a new approach to stimulate employment and growth and in order to ensure compliance with employability skills and qualifications in an opinion¹³ ESC recommended that relevant changes in the VET system in Bulgaria should be made.
 - 2.1. ESC expressed its unanimous support for the introduction and implementation of pilot training through work viewing it as a useful opportunity to acquire simultaneously a profession and qualification, especially for young people with low education and without qualification. ESC welcomed the adopted in September 2015 Regulations governing the terms and conditions for

¹² Opinion of the ESC on "Problems of Vocational Education and Training."

¹³ Opinion on the "Draft Act Amending and Supplementing the Vocational Education and Training Act".

- conducting dual training and quality assurance of vocational education and training;
- 2.2. ESC recommended to strengthen links between the different institutions of vocational education and training, universities, academia and businesses, working priority for: acceptance of the institutional framework for the main actors in the process of learning through work (dual training); updating curricula and expanding the scope of training firms in line with the demand for professions and specialties.
 - 2.3. ESC proposed that the model for training through work should cover four main groups of learners and trainees: school leavers; students from vocational schools or secondary schools; adults, who have not completed secondary education, for vocational training; training by working for people after completing secondary or higher education.
3. In its adopted acts ESC highlights the need for closer coordination between the institutions offering vocational education and training in the following directions:
- 3.1. Predicting the needs of the labour market and their compliance the educational structure of the labour force;
 - 3.2. Optimizing the school network based on a thorough analysis of the specific needs and conditions stated investment intentions municipalities, districts and regions;
 - 3.3. Mutual assistance between the school and businesses to improve the knowledge of teachers on the requirements and characteristics jobs and to acquire teaching skills of trainers in enterprises;
 - 3.4. Determination after consultation with the social partners "protected" jobs and their legislative regulation and approval in the list;
 - 3.5. Wider use of the modular approach to VET and creating opportunities for the application of the credit system to ease the transition from secondary vocational to higher education or to forms of lifelong learning.
4. ESC recommends adopting incentives to involve employers in the preparation, discussion and approval of professional standards, curricula and requirements in line with production processes; equipping workplaces to meet the quality requirements for achieving training and learning outcomes, safety and health at work; commitment to the training of mentors and trainers.
5. ESC insists that all future necessary changes, including labour and social security legislation should be prepared and consulted early enough ensuring full awareness and involvement of social partners and the expert community.
6. ESC recommends the development and implementation of pre and post assessment of the impact of the new measures, including estimates of required funding from major sources.

VI. HIGHER EDUCATION

1. Repeatedly in its acts ESC¹⁴ expressed concern about the serious problems existing in higher education, affecting the ability of universities to offer high-quality education, especially programmes relevant to the needs of the labour market.
2. ESC highlights the inconsistency of the national with the European academic standards, a prerequisite for low competitiveness of Bulgarian universities to European ones and a major cause of migration attitudes among graduating high school students with high academic achievements. ESC expresses concern about:
 - 2.1. Discrepancies between the educational and training needs of the economy; the fragmentation of higher education in Bulgaria; as well as the slowdown in the process of implementing the necessary reforms in the sector.
 - 2.2. Serious difficulties related to the realization of young professionals after completing their higher education. Most of them fail to find work in their area of specialization, work in places that do not require higher education or do not find a job. According to the ranking system of universities in Bulgaria for 2014, 46% of employed graduates work in a position that does not require higher education.
3. ESC believes that problems with the quality of higher education are determined, on the one hand, by poor quality primary and secondary education in the country, the shortcomings in the regulatory framework and inadequate financial provision of the activity as well as, on the other hand, by weaknesses in management and institutional efficiency of universities.
4. ESC is concerned about the existing problems with the criteria in admission and assessment of students during the learning process, insufficient motivation of teachers and students, as well as weaknesses in updating curricula, forms and methods of training. The external control system is weak and there is insufficient internal controls in individual autonomous universities. In this regard, ESC recommends curricula in various disciplines at universities to be prepared in accordance with the needs of the economy and in partnership with businesses.
5. ESC notes that in view of demographic processes leading to reduction of Bulgarian applicants for university education and the funding mechanism, whereby approximately 95% of the state subsidy is allocated based on the number of students, universities are forced to lead a "battle" for each student. The result is a compromise with the requirement for the competence of admitted students, which in turn leads to worsened quality in the acquired skills of graduates.
 - 5.1. In this regard, ESC believes that the system of subsidizing universities should not depend on the number of students, but should be viewed as a complex of components, including the level of employability of graduates, quality of education, compliance with the needs of the labour market.

¹⁴ Opinion "The Education System in Bulgaria - Problems and Necessary Reforms"; Opinion "Strategy for Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2014-2020"; Opinion "The Labour Market in the Context of the Financial and Economic Crisis - Challenges and Possible Solutions".

6. ESC is of the opinion that we should end the practice of "academic nomadism" and especially to require faculty members to be elected to the governing bodies of only one university with which they are mainly employed.
7. According to ESC, there is room for improvement in the links of universities, on the one hand, with the state administration, and on the other - with employers and employers' organizations, scientific institutions, NGOs with foreign universities (including for exchanges of teachers, development of joint projects, joint training, etc.), international organizations and institutions. The lack of an integrated approach interfered in the so-called "knowledge triangle" - "higher education - research - innovation."
8. ESC believes that there is much greater and real opportunity for the integration of higher with secondary vocational education by creating partnerships between specialized and vocational schools and universities.
9. The development and modernization of higher education must be converted into long-term national priority and is a leader in the planning and implementation of an integrated policy for young people, focusing mainly on the link between higher education and the labour market.
 - 9.1. ESC calls for the creation of a common framework that brings together various policy documents and capabilities of the operational programmes to improve the higher education system. Coordinated approach is needed between universities, employers and academic institutions that strengthen the links between them. By building a network for cooperation they will be able to exchange more easily information about the needs and possibilities of the market.
 - 9.2. ESC believes that the active involvement of social partners in the design and implementation of appropriate policies would help develop and improve the quality of Bulgarian higher education and accelerating the process of renewal of the specialties and accreditation of universities.
10. The ESC has repeatedly expressed concern about the emerging trend towards a shortage of prospective students in specialties in different areas of national importance and the need for legal regulation and financial incentives to provoke the interest of young people in these professions.
11. In order to overcome the deepening problems, ESC urges the responsible authorities to take adequate steps to continue the reform of the higher education system which requires long-term commitment. In this regard, ESC declares its readiness to participate actively in the consultation process.

(signed)

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