
OPPORTUNITIES FOR FORMAL ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN BULGARIA – A DISCUSSION ON FLEXIBILITY AND PERMEABILITY OF THE SYSTEM

Vanya Bozhilova

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Bulgaria, v.bozhilova@fp.uni-sofia.bg

Abstract: The research is an exploratory and aims to explore the main aspects of a problem, following three research questions: what are the opportunities for formal education and training for adults in Bulgaria, how the connectivity of educational stages and degrees is ensured and at what extend adults participate in formal education and training?

The objectives of the work are: 1) Based on the existing law regulations to present the main types of formal adult education. 2) Analysing the significant factors influencing the provision of adult education and the flexibility and permeability of the system in the sense of existing connectivity and access. 3) To study of national research results (secondary research data) that show the extent of adult participation in training.

The methodology considered three closely related issues: 1) The basics of research and analyses are currently ‘in action’ normative documents – laws in the field of education and training. 2) The research questions are focused on understanding the current situation – the study gather data (secondary research data) at a single point in time. 3) The research explore concepts and develop understanding. The design is flexible and developed through the data collection process.

Taking into account these issues the research methods are qualitative and descriptive and the analyses are thematic – interpret patterns and meanings in the data. The methodology includes: 1) Desk research of existing law regulations of the opportunities for adult education and training. 2) Analyses of factors influencing the provision of adult education and flexibility and permeability of the system 3) Analyses of a secondary research data that has already been collected by government survey of the National Statistical Institute and has been published in the National Information System for Adult Learning. The study takes into account all advantages and shortcomings of chosen methodology.

The main findings and discussion is about the flexibility and permeability of the system for formal adult education. First, the flexibility and permeability of the system in its two segments: pupil learning and adult learning. Second, the flexibility and permeability between different stages of the formal adult education system.

The conclusions show that:

- In the context of the education system, there is no clear definition of an adult learner. Its determination is determined by the compulsory schooling age. In the context of the employment enhancement system (an economically determined system), an adult learner refers to engaged in training 1) person who is between 16 and 65 years of age and is economically inactive, or 2) person who is unemployed and looking for work or 3) person who is employed and wanted to upgrade knowledge and skills.
- On the surface, it appears that the formal adult education and training system is flexible and permeable in the sense of existing connectivity and access. When we go into depth about the conditions related to the way education and training are provided, it can be seen that formal education and training is still looking for its specificity and connection with the self-directed learning of adult learners.

The discussion on flexibility and permeability of the system opens ongoing discussions on several levels: conditions for the existence and development of the system; participation in and reasons for adult learning; system characteristics in the context of lifelong learning and adult self-directed learning; sustainability conditions.

This article presents a part of research within the framework of project N 80-10-44/25.04.2023 "Evening schools in the context of lifelong learning ("Mission education" or why adults return to school?) financed by the state budget of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for scientific research for 2023.

Keywords: formal adult education, literacy courses, evening schools, courses for key competencies, flexibility and permeability of the system

1. INTRODUCTION

The research is an exploratory and aims to explore the main aspects of a problem, following three research questions: what are the opportunities for formal education and training for adults in Bulgaria, how the connectivity of educational stages and degrees is ensured and at what extend adults participate in formal education and training?

The objectives of the work are:

- Based on the existing law regulations to present the main types of formal adult education.

- Analysing the significant factors influencing the provision of adult education and the flexibility and permeability of the system in the sense of existing connectivity and access.
- To study of national research results (secondary research data) that show the extent of adult participation in training.

This article presents a part of research within the framework of project N 80-10-44/25.04.2023 "Evening schools in the context of lifelong learning ("Mission education" or why adults return to school?) financed by the state budget of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for scientific research for 2023.

The relevant background information used for the research is:

In Bulgaria, there is no independent law regulating adult education and training. Some aspects of which are an integral part of the Pre-school and School Education Act (PSEA) 2016, the Vocational Education and Training Act (VETA) 1999, the Employment Promotion Act (EPA) 2002, the Trades Act (TA) 2001, Ordinance No. 2 of 13.11.2014 on the conditions and procedure for validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences, and other regulations. Only in Employment Promotion Act the term "adult training" is used.

In general, adults in Bulgaria can be trained in the formal education system (in secondary schools – comprehensive and vocational, post-secondary – colleges, and higher schools – universities and academies) and in forms of non-formal education and training, part of the non-formal education system. A major driver of adult education in both systems is preparing people for access to the labour market and successful professional activity. The adult education and training system is still under construction.

2. METHODOLOGY (MATERIALS AND METHODS)

The methodology considered three closely related issues:

- The basics of research and analyses are currently 'in action' normative documents – laws in the field of education and training mentioned in the introduction.
- The research questions are focused on understanding the current situation – the study gather data (secondary research data) at a single point in time.
- The research explore concepts and develop understanding. The design is flexible and **developed through the data collection process**.

Taking into account these issues the research methods are qualitative and descriptive and the analyses are thematic – interpret patterns and meanings in the data.

The methodology includes:

- Desk research of existing law regulations of the opportunities for adult education and training;
- Analyses of main factors influencing the provision of adult education and flexibility and permeability of the system and
- Analyses of a secondary research data that has already been collected by government survey of the National Statistical Institute and has been published in the National Information System for Adult Learning.

The study takes into account all advantages and shortcomings of chosen methodology:

- The use of qualitative data is flexible, may develop new knowledge and conduct with small sample, but it is difficult to define the statistical significance of the results and there is a higher risk for research bias.
- The use of secondary research data is easier and faster to access and is possible to collect data that spans longer timescales, but there is lack of control over how data was generated.
- The use of descriptive approach allows describing research subject without influencing it, but there is lack of control over confounding variables.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The largest share of adult education in the formal education system belongs to post-secondary education, which takes place mainly in colleges, universities, and specialized higher schools. In Bulgaria, at present, there are 52 accredited higher schools in nine areas of higher education with the relevant professional fields and specialties for the acquisition of the educational and qualification degrees "Professional Bachelor", "Bachelor" and "Master", and the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD).

According to data from the National Statistical Institute, in the academic year 2020/2021, the number of students enrolled in higher education schools in Bulgaria was 226.4 thousand. Most of them were Bulgarian citizens (92.1%). Foreign students from Greece, the United Kingdom, Germany, Ukraine, and the Republic of North Macedonia were also enrolled". (National Statistical Institute, 2021).

According to the Bulgarian legislation, school education is compulsory until the age of 16 (Ministry of education and science, 2016). Therefore, the group of adult learners also includes young people who have reached the

compulsory school age and dropped out of school. The attention on such adult learners and opportunities to study at the formal education system is the focus of present study. They can be trained in:

- Literacy courses (Ministry of education and science, 2016; Ministry of labour and social policy, 2002) – a “*Literacy Course*” is the training to acquire competences for the initial stage of the primary education, which are sufficient for continuation of education at the next stage. “*Literacy process*” is a process for acquiring the general educational minimum in the subjects of “Bulgarian language and literature”, “Mathematics”, “Man and Society” and “Man and Nature”, determined as the initial stage of primary education (Ministry of education, 2008). It’s successful transition lead to the next adult training module – training in courses for acquiring competences from the basic education / lower secondary school stage for persons over 16 years of age or training for acquiring a professional qualification (Ministry of education, 2017).

- School classes of secondary school stage – in extramural, evening or individual form of education (Ministry of education, 2016).

- Courses for acquiring competences from the basic education/lower secondary school stage for persons over 16 years of age (Ministry of education, 2016).

- Evening schools (part of a general education schools) for acquiring secondary education with selected educational profiles (mathematics, information technology, management and marketing, literature and languages etc. (Ministry of education, 2016).

- Courses for acquiring a professional qualification – both in general schools (if there are such opportunities) and in vocational education and training schools (Ministry of education, 1999, 2016). “Schools which provide vocational training may organize and conduct preparatory courses for the validation of vocational competences for persons aged 16 or above”. (Ministry of education, 2016, art. 170).

- Courses in the framework programmes, for persons over 16 years old, for initial professional training (with a duration of 6 months to 1.5 years) or in framework programmes for professional qualification after secondary education (Ministry of education, 1999).

- Courses to acquire key competences – a complex of interdependent knowledge, skills and attitudes, necessary for each individual’s personal life-long development, for building an active civic position and social inclusion, as well as for one’s employability on the labour market (Ministry of labour and social policy, 2002).

- Courses at schools in places of deprivation of liberty – primary and secondary education and training courses for adults-prisoners as well as for professional qualification (Ministry of education, 2016).

It is important to note that only in Employment Promotion Act (2002) the term “adult training” is used. The other laws cited use the term “training of persons over 16”. This can be explained on the one hand by the lack of a separate adult education and training law that clearly defines who is an adult learner. On the other hand, the understanding of an adult learner is currently subordinated to the existing terminology distinguished students and adults as learners depending on the compulsory schooling age. Only the training of adults in the workplace and for work purposes (part of a non-formal education) is clearly defined in a separate law – Employment promotion act, 2002 – but it is closely linked only to increasing employment – economic factors.

The main discussion here is more about the *flexibility and permeability of the system for formal adult education*.

First, the flexibility and permeability of the system in its two segments: pupil learning and adult learning.

Second, the flexibility and permeability between different stages of the adult education system (in its formal component).

From the first point of view, the educational system integrates pupil learning and adult learning, which guarantees its coherence and integrity. On the other hand, in the formal adult education there are forms identical or close to the formal pupil education, especially in view of the fact that:

- The same educational organizations train both children and adults.

- The same teachers teach both children and adults.

- Training for the acquisition of basic and secondary education are implemented in three parallel existing ways: through training in basic or secondary education classes in an extramural or self-directed form of education; through training in courses for the acquisition of competences from the basic education stage / lower secondary education in general schools or through training in an evening schools.

The courses for acquiring competences from the lower secondary school stage for persons over 16 have been a “new phenomenon” in the Bulgarian education system, since 2017. They are implemented according to the Adapted curriculum for training in a course for acquiring competences for all classes from the lower secondary stage (2017). Include training programmes for 10 general education subjects: Bulgarian Language, Literature, English Language, Mathematics, Information Technologies, History and Civilizations, Geography and Economics, Man and Nature, Biology and Health Education, and Technology and Entrepreneurship. In each of the programmes, it is explicitly stated that it is adapted for the purposes of adult education, with reduced study time. The specific topics of the

educational content, the learning outcomes described as competences, and the forms and methods for evaluating the achievements are presented. Methodical materials for teachers and Resource packages for students are still under development (Ministry of education, 2017).

Until 2017, training of persons over 16 who were not pupils was only provided by *evening schools*. They were established at the end of the 19th century and, together with Sunday schools, were among the innovations of the Public Education Act of 1891. “They were created according to the Scandinavian model of the so-called “rural universities”. In them, along with subjects such as moral education, law of God, Bulgarian language, arithmetics and drawing, natural history, labour training, etc., practically-oriented subjects were taught, such as agriculture (for men), sewing, singing, raising children and housekeeping courses (for women)”. (Peev, 2014, pp. 19-20).

Art. 42 of the Preschool and school education act (Ministry of education, 2016) stipulates the specifics of modern evening schools – they organize training in the evening form for acquisition of secondary education and/or professional qualifications for persons over the age of 16, as well as for persons over the age of 14 who cannot attend a regular form of education. Training is offered in self-directed, individual and combined form. Currently, there are four evening schools in Bulgaria in the cities of Sofia (2 schools), Stara Zagora and Burgas.

Compared to courses for acquisition of competences, evening schools offer systematic training in academic subjects for the respective academic years, without shortening the training time, and hence its overall duration. Learners are divided into study classes (similar to the school system for pupils) and study content is covered according to the state educational standards (SES) for general education (according to the study content of the individual subjects that are studied in the respective grade). In this sense, evening schools are analogous to regular schools for pupils, but they are intended for persons over the age of 16 who, for various reasons, have interrupted their education. Most often, among the reasons for this, which they share, are the need to start work, getting married and starting a family, travelling abroad, an effective sentence and many others. In various surveys, these persons are defined as “early school leavers”. Terms such as “dropping-out”, “pushing out”, “suspension from school”, “neglect”, “abandonment”, “voluntary dropping-out”, “early dropping-out from the education system” and “non-completion” are also used for such situations.

The reasons for which adults “return” to school are diverse, specific and closely related to the way of work and life of each one of them. For some, they are related to the demands of their current job, some are motivated by their children and the desire to be an example to them, and some seek satisfaction and a sense of success. For all, the unifying factor is the search for Meaning.

The differences between training for the acquisition of key competences from the lower secondary stage of education in general schools and training for the acquisition of secondary education in evening schools are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Comparison between training for persons over the age of 16 for acquisition of key competences in general schools and training of persons over the age of 16 in evening schools

Comparison criteria	Training for persons over 16 for acquisition of key competences in general schools	Training of persons over 16 in evening schools
Duration of training	Training in total 1 080 hours in 3 stages – I, II and III, which correspond to 3 classes of the basic education / lower secondary education (V th , VI th and VII th grade). Total duration – 36 academic weeks.	Training is divided into academic years and academic classes corresponding to the stages of the educational system: V, VI, VII th grades – middle school (basic education, lower secondary education) VIII, IX, X grades – first stage of upper secondary school XI and XII grades – second stage of upper secondary school. Total duration – 8 academic years (240 academic weeks)
Learning materials	Adapted curricula for adult education Learning packages	Traditional textbooks and manuals used in teaching students
Teacher preparation	Traditional teacher training in all forms – university teacher training, postgraduate programmes for teachers for continuing and further education, training programs for the acquisition of professional qualification degrees No specialized training in teaching adults.	Traditional teacher training in all forms – university teacher training, postgraduate programmes for teachers for continuing and further education, training programs for the acquisition of professional qualification degrees No specialized training in teaching adults.
Completion document	Certificate of validation of competences for a basic education, which gives the right to continue in the next secondary level of education or training to acquire a non-professional qualification;	Certificate for a basic education Secondary education diploma

For certain parameters, we can see an overlap between the forms of education for pupils and for adults, for others – a significant differentiation, based on the specificity of the adult learner as self-directed, which influence motivation for learning – this has been proven by numerous scientific studies (Kim, 2005; Ahmad & Majid, 2010; Jones, 2013; Loeng, 2020; Robinson & Persky, 2020). Which raises the question to what extent adult education provides all the conditions that support self-directed learning and whether the system is flexible and permeable is a sufficient condition for its existence and effectiveness. The answer to these questions is the subject of further research.

From the second point of view, example of the flexibility and permeability between different stages of the adult education system are literacy courses. The legislative regulation of adult literacy courses (Ministry of education, 2016; Ministry of labour, 2002) effectively fills an educational niche providing persons over the age of 16 who have never started school (illiterate) or have earlier left the school system (for some reasons) to acquire knowledge, skills and competences. These competences are a condition for access to the next stages of educational system – basic education/lower and upper secondary education. Thus, connection and permeability in the educational stages (in the meaning of adult education) are indeed guaranteed.

A combination of factors influence the creation of adult literacy courses:

• *Factors related to the specificity of adults as learners:*

- Adults have accumulated experience – often unorganized, but proven in practice, which can be used as a learning resource in the training programmes.

- Adults learn best through practice, through action, in order to see the achieved results of learning and the possibilities of their application immediately, “here-and-now”.

- In the learning process, adults seek for solutions to specific problems they encounter in real life.

- Their motivation for learning is a complex of internally determined incentives for change in combination with the external conditions of the environment in which they live, work and study.

• *Factors related to the standards for educational content and the standards for assessment of the learning outcomes:*

- The educational content in the literacy courses corresponds to the standard for educational content for the initial stage of the primary level of school education; its specificity, the logic of its structuring, intra-subject and inter-subject connections, principles, methods and means of training are taken into account.

- Learners can take exams to obtain a certificate of completion of a literacy course, which provides them with the opportunity to continue their studies in courses for acquisition of competences from the lower secondary school stage or in courses for acquisition of a professional qualification for persons over 16 years of age.

• *Factors related to employability:*

- The profile of adults who enrol in literacy courses is that of unemployed persons who are motivated to learn and improve their personal capacity, receive training that allows them to overcome gaps in their education and obtain a professional qualification (“Curricula for adult training in literacy courses”, 2008).

The mentioned three groups of factors give reason that the training in literacy courses has to be carried out with teaching aids tailored to the characteristics of the target group or with educational materials for pupils that are adapted to adults’ needs. It is carried out differently – depending on the skills demonstrated at the entrance level test – and lasts up to 5 months and a total of 600 (six hundred) study hours (“Curricula for adult training in literacy courses”, 2008).

What do surveys show – **at what extend adults participate in formal adult education courses?**

As of 2011, the relative share of illiterates aged 15 and over for the country as a whole was 2.2% (“National Information System for Adult Learning”, n.d.). Unfortunately, at the moment, there is no tracking of how many of the illiterate persons in Bulgaria are enrolled in literacy courses. Available data from surveys at the national level show the number of persons aged 25-64 enrolled in formal education programmes (part of which are literacy courses) by level of education completed and by employment status. Those with primary and lower education are the least active in formal adult education programmes, but there was a slight trend from 2007 to 2016 of an increase in the absolute value of participation, from 0.2% in 2007 to 1% in 2016. (“National Information System for Adult Learning”, n.d.)

Regarding the variable “employment status” of participants in formal adult education programmes, the highest participation was observed among the economically inactive and the lowest among the unemployed. The tendency for the economically inactive and the unemployed went towards reduced participation – from 2007 to 2016 (for the economically inactive – from 4.6% to 4%; for the unemployed – from 1.3 to 1.1%). On the contrary, the trend among the employed persons went upward, as the relative value of their participation in formal education slightly increased – from 2.5% (2007) to 3% (2016). (“National Information System for Adult Learning”, n.d.).

Adult participation in vocational training and acquiring a professional qualification is higher. In recent years, the number of those who have acquired third- and fourth-degree professional qualifications has been increasing.

According to data from the National Information System for Adult Learning, in 2020 they were 31.3%. The minimum entry educational level for them is secondary education or an acquired right to take state matriculation exams. It shows that people with a higher level of education are more active in terms of acquiring a qualification. The results achieved by participants in formal education programmes are directly related to: finding a new job (21.9% – 2016), promotion (17.1% – 2016), taking on new responsibilities at the workplace (22% – 2016). (“National Information System for Adult Learning”, n.d.). Given the scope of this paper, the results and discussion of studies of the reasons for adults' participation in formal education and training will be presented in a subsequent publication.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Some important findings from the research are:

- In the context of the education system, there is no clear definition of an adult learner. Its determination is determined by the compulsory schooling age. In the context of the employment enhancement system (an economically determined system), an adult learner refers to engaged in training 1) person who is between 16 and 65 years of age and is economically inactive, or 2) person who is unemployed and looking for work or 3) person who is employed and wanted to upgrade knowledge and skills.
- On the surface, it appears that the formal adult education and training system is flexible and permeable in the sense of existing connectivity and access. When we go into depth about the conditions related to the way education and training are provided, it can be seen that formal education and training is still looking for its specificity and connection with the self-directed learning of adult learners. Some new questions arise – to what extent adult education provides all the conditions that support self-directed learning at all system stages and whether the system is flexible and permeable is a the first condition to build that connectivity? So the research work continues. Commonly may conclude, the system of adult education and training in Bulgaria is under development and the opportunities for formal adult education and training are increasing. The discussion on flexibility and permeability of the system opens ongoing discussions on several levels: conditions for the existence and development of the system; participation in and reasons for adult learning; system characteristics in the context of lifelong learning and adult self-directed learning; sustainability conditions.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, B. E., & Majid, F. A. (2010). Self-directed learning and culture: A study on Malay adult learners. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 7, 254-263.
- Daily, J. A., & Landis, B. J. (2014). The journey to becoming an adult learner: From dependent to self-directed learning. *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, 64(19), 2066-2068.
- Jones, A. R. (2013). Increasing adult learner motivation for completing self-directed e-learning. *Performance Improvement*, 52(7), 32-42.
- Kim, K. J. (2005). *Adult learners' motivation in self-directed e-learning*. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/7107/umi-indiana-1145.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Loeng, S. (2020). Self-directed learning: A core concept in adult education. *Education Research International*, 2020, 1-12.
- Ministry of Education and Science (1999). *Vocational Education and Training Act*. Retrieved from <https://web.mon.bg/bg/57>.
- Ministry of Education and Science (2008). *Curricula for adult training in literacy courses*. Retrieved from <https://web.mon.bg/bg/101003>.
- Ministry of Education and Science (2016). *Pre-school and School Education Act*. Retrieved from <https://web.mon.bg/bg/57>.
- Ministry of Education and Science (2017). *Adapted curriculum for training in a course for acquiring competences for all classes from the lower secondary stage*. Retrieved from <https://web.mon.bg/bg/101004>.
- Ministry of Education and Science (n.d.). *National Information System for Adult Learning*. Retrieved from <https://lll.mon.bg/?lang=en>.
- Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. Employment Agency (2002). *Employment Promotion Act*. Retrieved from <https://www.az.government.bg/pages/zakoni/#>.
- National Statistical Institute (2021). *Education in the Republic of Bulgaria during the academic year 2020/2021*. Retrieved from https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Education2020_8POU0B1.pdf.
- Peev, G. (2014). *Building of the Bulgarian education at the beginning of the third Bulgarian state*. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266266214_Izgrazdaneto_na_blgarskoto_obrazovanie_v_nacaloto_na_a_Tretata_blgarska_drzava_Building_of_the_Bulgarian_education_at_the_beginning_of_the_Third_Bulgarian_State](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266266214_Izgrazdaneto_na_blgarskoto_obrazovanie_v_nacaloto_na_Tretata_blgarska_drzava_Building_of_the_Bulgarian_education_at_the_beginning_of_the_Third_Bulgarian_State)
- Robinson, J. D., & Persky, A. M. (2020). Developing self-directed learners. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 84(3).