



# MEANING AND ROLE OF HIGHER SCHOOL FOR BULGARIAN REGIONS' SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

*This article is a partial picture of higher education in Bulgaria and the need to provide quality educational services at the regional level. The exhibition presents the importance and role of higher education for the recruitment of the regional elite and the quality of staff. A methodological framework that is proposed, assumes the systematization of the accumulated theoretical and practical experience in the field of higher education. Some deficiencies have been systematized, which affect the quality of education and the mismatch between business expectations at the level of planning regions, as well as the impact on municipalities and the need for staff for higher education graduates in the country. The main trends and conditions in which higher education in Bulgaria is developing and the search for opportunities to increase its role within the Bulgarian regions are outlined. In practice, regional development can become a national priority by building a quality educational environment and having a balanced regional development.*

**Keywords:** education, higher schools, business, municipalities, regions, services, model

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The evolutionary state and organizational nature of social systems are verified in territorial

structures, which is why they are the subject of governance and regional sciences. The intensity of the recruitment of regional social elites shows the extent to which local communities can build sustainable systems. In practice, the development of territorial systems aims to outline their social status, which creates the world socio-cultural map, in which education has a significant place.

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This forms the regional focus and the need for the regional institutions functioning to set a sustainable model of the system's reproduction. This is how the territorial communities are typified, which, according to the scenarios for social transformations, help to differentiate the territories, as well as for their appropriate management. In this context is our interest in the topic, provoked by a certain discrepancy between the rapidly changing environment and the relatively slow changes in the regional development of countries in transition such as Bulgaria. The focus of our research is to bring out the role of higher education institutions at the regional level and how they affect regional development and play a role in promoting the socio-economic development of individual regions. Our presentation aims to highlight the need to create an effective spatial saturation of Bulgaria with universities that support regional economic and social development. In this direction, we set ourselves the task to examine the state of higher education in Bulgaria, analyze its effectiveness, and identify the problems it faces. Next, let us indicate for the territory of Bulgaria whether the model with the development of higher education in the individual regions or maintaining the current model of continuing centralization of higher education will continue to develop. The full answers to these tasks can hardly be found in the current presentation, but we aim to show that regional development needs its focus and opportunity for regional development. We can state that in the last 10 years the higher education system has undergone several reforms. This makes the issue of providing quality higher education services critical to a competitive national economy. This further argues the need to assess the regional specifics of higher education and whether it can have its role and importance for our national development. In addition, we can emphasize that Bulgaria is facing a demographic crisis. As a result of this crisis, there is a significant reduction in the number of students. The ongoing structural reforms in the higher education system related to the financing and accreditation of higher education institutions; unfavorable age distribution of the academic staff does not give the necessary results, which led to the withdrawal of young people from academic careers. (Andreeva

& Dimitrova, 2021, p. 9). In addition, we can say that Bulgarian universities need to look for options for building their branches or regional centers with which to support regional business, local government, as well as to make efforts to implement research and development activities at the local level. This means that universities are looking for opportunities for closer dialogue with local authorities and regional businesses. The focus of this approach is to achieve a greater scope of their provision of educational services to regional businesses and support to the public sector, through the development of communication channels that allow for useful cooperation (Grimaldi, Kenney, & Piccaluga, 2020). Therefore, regionalization is one of the main drivers of cooperation between the academic and the private sector. One of the factors is the mobility of workers, as well as the people who want to get a higher education, which increases the competition to attract the best among them. Achieving acceptable levels of mobility and migration can be achieved by providing quality educational services at the local level, supporting local businesses in the direction of research and development, and forming a local elite. This means reaching higher education. In modern society, closer cooperation between the state, business, and local government is needed, which should be expressed in strengthening the relations and connections between business, universities, education, and culture. (Lis, 2021, p. 2) The emphasizing of the relation between local and regional development processes and the development of innovation means that universities are expected to develop innovations as well as to support development processes, especially in countries in transition, such as our country (Goransson, Maharajh, & Schmoch, 2009, p. 158).

## 2 HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS ROLE IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

At the beginning of our presentation, it is necessary to emphasize that in the last 10 years Bulgarian higher education is in constant reform. The results of these reforms cannot be analyzed due to the frequent change in the philosophy of

the development of higher education in Bulgaria. The model of higher education imposed in the last few years is moving towards close profiling of Bulgarian universities and their centralization. This will undoubtedly reduce their flexibility and retreat from already won positions. In practice, the new role of universities in Bulgaria is to have a more professional profile and to provide educational services in the field of industrial production at the expense of reducing government admission in the field of services. On the other hand, with the advent of Covid - 19, the world began to change in favor of services and digitalization. In practice, in this new environment and higher education will be subject to the influence of complex factors, including the processes of digitalization and globalization. As noted by Nillsen (2005, p. 89) in the current environment universities are under enormous pressure from governments to view student learning in a purely technical setting, while teaching certain intellectual aspects with greater potential for realizing values such as integrity are not a priority. Another important issue is the emerging regional differences between the various regions in Europe. To a large extent, the lagging behind of these regions is also related to the deficit of young people aged from 18 to 25. In this age group, the population defines its professional path of development and so the probability of settling in underdeveloped regions is unlikely. In practice, depressed regions have a deficit of social perspective on the one hand and a quality institutional environment for development on the other. The processes of socio-economic and cultural strengthening of similarities and/or differences are an indispensable attribute of social transformations, with the effect of asymmetric and irreversible social stratification and the need for institutions such as universities to set a model of sustainable development. The analysis and understanding of social transformations in territorial terms is the application for a significant role of higher education institutions at the local level as a factor for a changing society. However, gaining public and scientific recognition requires not only knowledge but also ideas, imagination, and action. The prosperity of each country and the international community is linked to education at

all levels. In this sense, higher education occupies an important place in the overall vision for the transformation of modern education. Bulgaria has a long tradition in the development of education. During the different periods, the society has demanded a high level of the educational process, having been upgraded both in the requirements to the separate educational levels and in their normative regulation through a comprehensive state policy. That is why in the current stage of development of the country the management of the educational process taking place in higher education is essential. The competitiveness of universities is essential and to assess it, it is necessary to evaluate its value as a market entity and the value of the products and services it offers. The competitive advantages that the respective higher education institution has in the education market are also an important element in determining its value. The value of educational services in higher education depends on the assessment of consumers, as well as on the learning process itself and its outcome (Todorova, 2019, p. 2). Our leading thesis is that regional development should not be perceived only as cataloging and inventory of resources and territories, but in the spirit of successful attempts to understand the evolution of society in the territory, the spatial relationship between nature and territorial communities, and the importance of places for active human activity. Perceiving regional science as a form of rational reflection, a combination of method and accuracy, pure reasoning and formulation of ideas, and regional development - as a science of synergetic of human society in space and time, the modern processes of globalization and regionalization in their territorial differentiation and specificity fit into the subject essence. Thus, we determine that institutions such as higher education institutions can play a significant role in determining the framework of socio-economic development of the regions in Bulgaria. In practice, this model of sustainable development of settlements in modern society passes through the reflection of higher education. Higher education institutions, with their dominant spatial-temporal paradigm, within the regional spaces can really and successfully fit in as a factor for the development of modern processes of globalization, interpreting

them through the prism of spatial relations with regionalization. If the continual nature of space stimulates globalization, then the discrete one stimulates regionalization, and thus the territorial university environment is created for the promotion of the functioning of the regional elite and the significant role of higher education institutions in local development. Here is the place to outline that human nature is as connected to the territory as it is to time. This gives us grounds to entrust education as a natural object of our national development. Thus, the focus of education includes the national space with its variations and features of regional development, which defines the need for the type of knowledge, signs, and codes that grow based on spatial practices and references of social development, business, and public sector development.

### **3 METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH ON EDUCATIONAL SERVICES**

The current study assumes that the regional environment is complex, changeable, imperfect and requires the state to set mechanisms for the development and promotion of socio-economic development of the regions. In this direction, the study of the behavior of the need for staff with higher education for business, and on the other hand the capacity of higher education institutions to provide such quality services. Thus, through methods of regional analysis and questionnaire, we will analyze the state of regional systems and the importance of human capital in them. It is essential to check the state of the labor market and the opportunities for a regional system to check the extent to which there is an optimal environment for their functioning. In this direction, the spatial approach means to determine at the territorial level the factors that build the business environment and the need for educational services. In this regard, we can assume that the competitiveness of educational services is perceived as a process that is determined by changes in the business environment and the model of regional development of the country. A wide range of scientific methods is used in regional research. System analysis plays an important role. This is a method based on the

step-by-step principle (setting goals, setting tasks, formulating a scientific hypothesis, a comprehensive study of the characteristics of the optimal location of industries). Through this approach, we can show more clearly how the economic sectors are structured, their internal connections, and their interaction. In the field of educational services and regionalization, we can also use the method of systematization. In practice, it is related to the division of the studied phenomena (based on the objectives of the research) and the selected criteria into aggregates, characterized by a certain community and distinctive features. This means that we will require the application of techniques such as classification, typology, concentration, etc. Sociological surveys are also essential for the evaluation and methodology of research on education and its regional significance. For this article, we refer to a survey conducted in the second half of 2021 among businesses and municipalities on the need for people with higher education. As part of the overall study, studies were conducted to reveal the main trends and opportunities for Bulgarian higher education in Bulgaria. The survey was conducted in three areas - a study of the needs and requirements of the business (more than 600 respondents were surveyed, mainly medium and large companies in the country) and municipalities. Logically, a detailed analysis of the digital platforms for labor supply and demand and the relevant requirements was performed. On this basis, the assessment and recommendations of the Bulgarian business and municipalities for the improvement of Bulgarian higher education were established. Although we must say that the goal of higher education is not limited to the economic sphere, the demand for quality graduates is determined by global capitalism (Kruss, Petepsen, Mcgrath, & Gastrow, 2015, p. 29).

In the survey, 70% of employers do not have preferences for their employees where they have completed their education, and over ¼ prefer those who receive their degree in Bulgaria. Only 4% favor those graduates of foreign universities. Based on these data, we can conclude that in 96% of employers, their employees may have graduated in Bulgarian country, which proves the

important role of higher education in Bulgaria, as well as what specialists they train. For example, in a company where the average working life of employees is 10-15 years, there is a jump in turnover among those who have worked for five to seven years (i.e., in one of the most valuable categories of workers). The models of the economic base are quite simple both in terms of theoretical justification and in terms of development. For their construction, only indicators of economic activity (mainly employment indicators) are needed for two periods of time. The analysis of the economic base is an accelerated method for forecasting regional economic growth, using a simplified theory of growth and minimal information needs.

The results obtained are limited to forecasting the development of the main and service sectors. A more detailed analysis may show that this is due to the lack of a career development system in the organization, i.e., employees do not see prospects for their growth here and therefore leave. On the other hand, the choice of young professionals from one or another higher school shows that companies see in the training process young professionals acquire the necessary education. It is important to note that in Bulgarian country there is still a large share of employers, nearly 57%, for whom the university where their staff was trained is irrelevant, which can be seen from Figure 1.

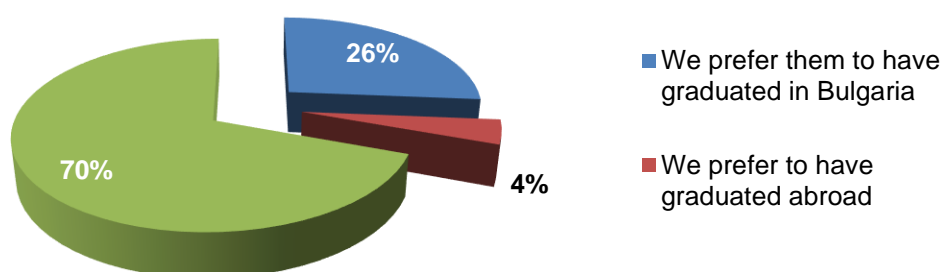


Figure 1. Preferences of employers where their employees graduated  
Source: Authors' Research

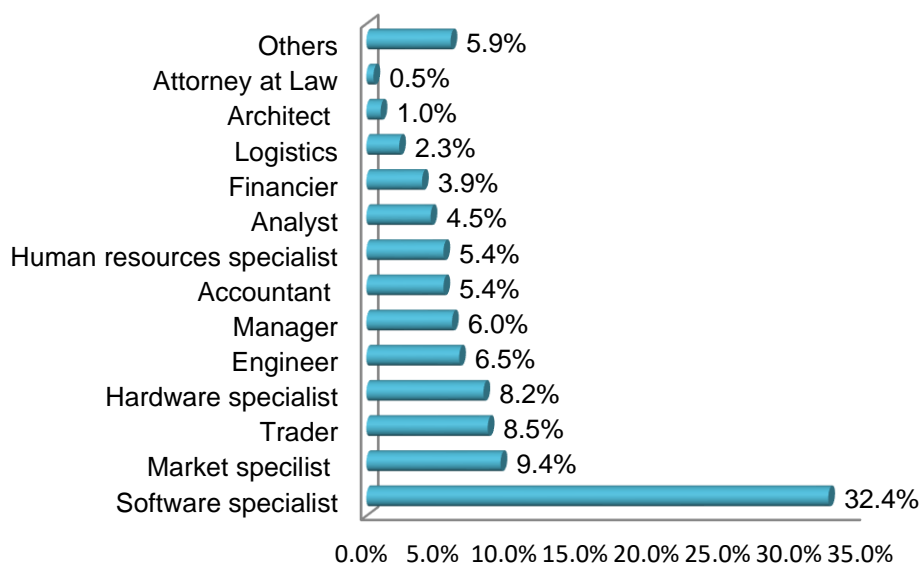


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of job positions  
Source: Authors' Research.

Figure 2 shows that the demand for lawyers is 0.5% of all advertisements, which shows that due to the existence of 13 law faculties in Bulgaria there is a saturation of the market. There is little

interest in the position of architect, which is understandable due to the scope of this specialty and the role in the construction industry. Next, the profession of logistics occupies only 2.3% of the

ads, but on the other hand, in a covid crisis, this is one of the most dynamically developing areas. In our opinion, the crisis has affected the demand for these specialists, because the transport industry is one of the most severely affected. Arguments in this direction are also the statistics, which show that transport and logistics are structurally determining for the Bulgarian economy. Moreover, this industry is competitive on a European scale. That is why we believe that with the recovery of the Bulgarian state and the European economy from the crisis, the demand for specialists in the field of logistics will increase. Other positions such as *financier, analysts, accountant, and human resources management* are in the range of 5-6%, which in practice shows moderate demand given the development of the services sector. The most probable problem with these professions is that the demand for staff is mainly in the 7 big cities in Bulgaria. The demands for *designers, engineers, traders, hardware specialists, managers, and marketers* are more intensive, which is within 6-9%. This shows that the economy has development opportunities, but on the other hand most of the positions offered are mainly in Sofia and the regional centers in the country. We can give several arguments for this fact. For example, Sofia-city has the largest and most developed economy. A large part of the active population is concentrated in Sofia. And finally, the Bulgarian capital has the largest number of universities. The largest university of economics in Bulgaria is also located in Sofia. At the same time, this group of professions in practice can expand its scope and continue to produce a moderate number of specialists with higher education. The proposed figure shows that the most sought specialty is *software* as it practically covers almost one third of all ads. The humanities are increasingly giving way to technical and scientific disciplines (Casado, Martinez, & Patrao Neves, 2018, p. 66).

In practice, the study of educational services at the local level is too modest. One of the reasons is the chaotic transition in Bulgaria, which has led to diverse economic activity in many industries with short-term and partial success, which is carried out in various geographical aspects. Bulgaria's lagging in the field of regional training

and the implementation of the concept of lifelong learning is an additional argument to seek a comprehensive mechanism for coordinating efforts in this direction. Serious attention and attitude are required, both in theory and in practice, of universities and public administration structures as direct users to make sense of the quality functioning of the nation-state. In the training of staff with higher education, it is necessary, in our opinion, the widespread use of research in the management process, as it is higher education that implements all elements of management processes, both nationally and locally. Achieving the efficiency of educational services means applying the strategic approach as an ongoing process of making sense of the full cycle of governance, which will define a sustainable model of regional governance of individual regions. Here is the role of the university as a necessary work of the teaching teams and scientific potential in them to make the regions more attractive for young people.

#### 4 ANALYSIS AND ESTIMATION OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES' NEEDS AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

As it became clear from the research of business and municipalities, there is an urgent need for trained and qualified specialists with higher education. There is an objective need for engineers, computer specialists, managers, educators, doctors, nurses, cartographers, agronomists, and others. The focus of the study is on more planning regions in Bulgaria. Generally, the results show that the need for graduates with specific education corresponds to the sectoral and territorial structure of regional farms in Bulgaria. It is imperative that improving the link between business and higher education implies strengthening the role of universities in regional development. This goal is set in the adopted Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Bulgaria 2021 - 2030. This goal can be achieved by strengthening the connection of higher education with the relevant environment at the regional level. And of course, this includes creating good partnerships and networks for cooperation between individual universities and even with vocational high schools. To improve the

territorial location of higher education institutions, the idea of strengthening their cooperation with regional schools should be considered.

The process of electrification is likely to lead to an increase in the salaries of these specialists due to the high level of their demand. In practice, the current data show the need to be compared with the assessment ratings of the rating system. According to the rating system, the highest degree of application of the acquired higher education has the graduates of the professional fields of Military Affairs (99%), Pharmacy (95%), Medicine (95%), Dentistry (93%), Veterinary Medicine (73%) and Pedagogy (72%). One possible explanation is that the demand is higher because of the high degree of regulation of these areas and the planning of public procurement according to needs. Significantly lower is the application of the acquired higher education to the graduates of the professional fields with the largest number of

students - Economics (38%) and Administration and Management (37%), (Smetnata palata (Protokol № 15), 2017, p. 14). In practice, however, the supply and demand of labor is a dynamic feature. In this sense, the professional fields of administration, management, and economics should not be neglected. In this regard, the better approach is to create more "hybrid" specialties and even separate courses and curricula that translate into more than one professional field. This may be a solution because the number of higher education graduates has generally decreased in recent years. Demographically, in the period 2022-2030, we can have a retention of the trend and a slight increase in student enrollment. After the period 2030, we will witness a drastic reduction in students for purely demographic reasons with reduced birth rates in the period 2011-2021. This implies further reform of higher education in addition to imposing the competency model.

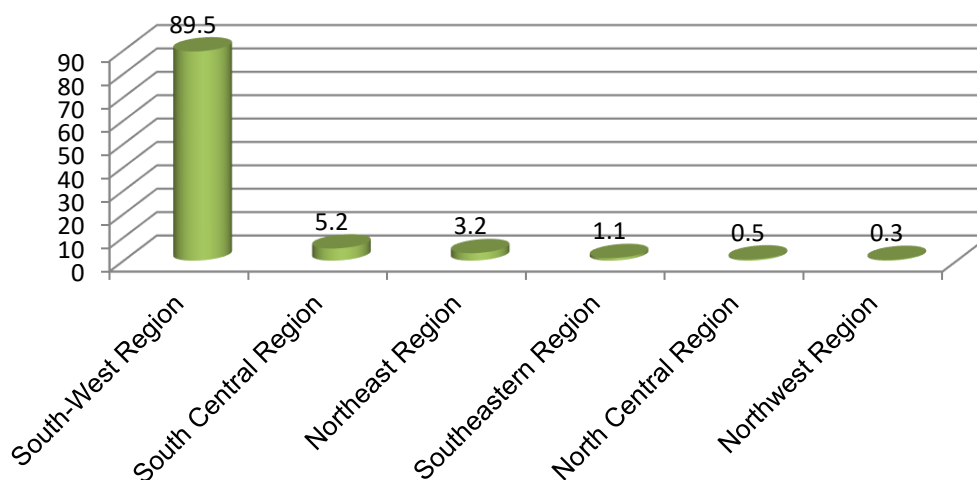


Figure 3. Percentage distribution according to the offered work

Source: Authors' Research

In terms of the percentage distribution of work offered by regions, the South-Western Planning Region is leading. The advertisements offered in it are almost 89.5% of all electronic job offers. Here is the place to say that the Southwest region occupies a leading position in the formation of the country's total GDP. The coefficient of economic activity of the population aged 15-64 on 31.12.2020 is - 77.5% and is the highest in the country. The region takes first place in terms of investment growth compared to the same period last year, as well as the number of newly created

vacancies. Sofia-city continues to be among the leaders on the industrial map of Bulgaria, occupying a leading position in the manufacturing industry. Micro, small and medium-sized businesses account for 70% of Sofia's output, and trends over the past few years suggest that its share is likely to increase soon.

In second place is the South-Central Planning Region with 5.2%, which has positive trends in the development of its economy in recent years. According to Eurostat data, the registered

unemployment in the labor offices in the South-Central region covers 48,957 people on average per month in 2020. The average unemployment rate in the South-Central region in 2020 was 7.63%, compared to 7.4% for the country. This fact shows that the region has greater opportunities for spatial development, which is likely to lead to increased demand for labor in this planning region. Analyzing the region, it is important to consider the role and importance of the higher education institutions that are in it. Plovdiv Technical-, Medical-, and Agricultural University, and the University of Food Technologies, as well as some smaller parts of higher schools, are in Plovdiv.

In smaller cities in this district, there are external branches or other units of higher education. In third place is the Northeast Planning Region with 3.2% of ads. This is natural because the economic situation in the Northeast region is determined by seasonality in labor supply and demand, which is determined by the structure of the economy. According to Eurostat data, the largest share belongs to industries that are seasonal in nature - agriculture, tourism, trade, processing industry (food, clothing, glass, porcelain, and earthenware industry). The active period for them is the summer and accordingly, a high level of employment is reported. During the autumn-winter season, there is a lower business activity, and demand for labor decreases (EC, Union, An official website of the European, 2020). It is important to mention that the leader in the Northeast Planning Region is the city of Varna, which is also one of the leading university centers. This suggests that the region has large reserves in terms of labor resources and opportunities to attract investment. The other three planning regions have a very small share of the ads. According to our views, the North Central Planning Region has the potential to attract additional investment, especially in the cities of Ruse, Svishtov, Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo, and Silistra, where there is a concentration of young people due to the availability of universities. This implies further efforts to support the development of the potential of the North Central Planning Region. Close to this state is the Southeastern Planning Region, where the Thracian University - Stara Zagora, Burgas Free University, and the

University "Prof. A. Zlatarov - Burgas", as well as branches of several other universities, which generally make efforts to develop human capital in the region. It is important to emphasize that in our society it is difficult to understand the philosophy of sectoral conditionality of the national economy because according to the state professional fields 3.7 "Administration and Management" and 3.8 "Economics" are saturated, provided that the annual need for specialists in tertiary sector annually amounts to the order of 18-20 thousand people. It is normal in such cases, before reducing the state reception in these areas, to give a clearer and more definite assessment of the reasons for such a reduction, rather than the bureaucratic approach. Of course, we should not go to extremes on one or another topic in the field of higher education, but to carry out the reform by looking for arguments and finding quality solutions. At least, because in recent years, given the introduction of new technologies, a new student profile has come to the fore, in which marketing, financial austerity, and other changes are leading, this certainly means a new environment for higher education. The manner of realization of university graduates shows that in the labor market higher education is important not only through the specialized training it provides but also in its more general quality of higher education (Boyadzhieva, 2012, p. 26). Improving quality is an endemic problem for all four sectors (culture, education, health, social security, support, and care). As a rule, public assessments of the quality of services are low and expectations are high. For example, the quality of social services, measured by the indicator of *satisfaction* of consumers and their families are consistently low - 75% of people with disabilities believe that they are not perceived as equal by others, 85.7% assess public transport as inaccessible, 77% cannot visit cultural centers" (Penkova et al., 2019: 224-225).

## 5 TENDENCIES AND PERSPECTIVE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER SCHOOLS AT THE REGIONAL LEVELS

The aspiration of the individual to maximum professional realization, as well as the process of realization, is largely dependent on the social

structure of society, the individual right to free choice of education, profession and expression in it, the individual's ability to take social responsibilities itself, in front of the family and the professional group whose interests it defends. In this new reality, higher education has virtually no boundaries, our higher education institutions need serious investments from the state and the private sector in higher education to survive in this new highly competitive environment. Universities are under enormous pressure to look at student learning in purely technical terms. This fact can be explained because they do not have a holistic overall perspective. Governments see the primary function of universities for the most part as meeting the technical needs of society. And modern society is more complex and is becoming more complex through the growing set of technologies and the further activities that these technologies make possible. Eventually, many higher education institutions lose their role as institutions training future leaders in various fields and instead are perceived as factories producing workers to meet the most immediate needs of society (Nilsen, 2005, p. 89). We need to move towards a new type of development policy, which should orient higher education towards more practical training, research, creation of products in higher education related to the production of information and technology. Although such efforts are slowing down the reduction of public funds. The perception of the university as one of the key players in society and the economy is a great opportunity today and the Bulgarian state should not miss this opportunity.

In addition, we must be aware that the market of educational services in the Bulgarian state is very specific, and the aim is to be fully linked to the labor market. However, this must be accompanied by a vision of the adaptability of educational services to the new knowledge-based global economy. This means more research, innovation, and technology, an increased need for talented researchers and a skilled workforce, and therefore more roles for universities. There are also downsides to these promising developments and changes in the world of higher education. There is no clear evidence that the proliferation of higher education and the use of information technology

is expanding the access of low-income, immigrant or ethnic students to higher education. Here is the role of the state to promote a more detailed study of the demographic situation in the modern nation-state, but also what kind of immigrant stream flows into the economy. This further highlights the importance of university education, which also has an educational role, but also as an engine of economic development.

In this direction, the role of the university is divided, at the same time to train staff and seek innovation. In practice, this complex role, which is assigned to it, means that higher education will be closer to the regions. Being closer to business also means increasing access to higher education, improving quality, mobility, international networking, and cooperation, among other things, will also complement and change these developments. So higher education institutions need to pay attention to the issue of fair access to education and reconstruct their way of providing services according to the different student groups. Of course, governments have a great responsibility to do this through legal and financial instruments. On the agenda is the need to engage the state with solutions and significant financial support for reforms in higher education to achieve the desired results - a competitive separate educational product, opening universities to cooperation and developing joint programs with Bulgarian and foreign universities, building working and effective relations with business representatives and all users of personnel, improving the quality of education and research, stimulating the participation of universities and business in joint actions and work on projects of practical and applied nature, building a functioning system for access of students to practical training, internships and part-time work in the specialty and the transformation of universities into regional and national centers, contributing to local and national economic development. (Slaveva, 2021, p. 21) It would be not only ruthless but also unwise to make higher education available only to those people who have money, because creativity, innovative thinking, and/or disciplined work are not shared only among them.

It is important to point out that the educational system in Bulgaria has always had its social role. This is an important milestone that must always be set in the current and future changes in the higher education system. The opinion of the employers about the quality of the specialists trained in the different higher schools is categorical - more than half of the respondents indicate only 4 higher schools - the Sofia University, the University of National and World Economy, the Technical University - Sofia and the Medical University - Sofia. (Boyadzhieva, 2012, p. 22). Undoubtedly, in recent years the imposed model of state centralization has led to the concentration of higher education in the biggest cities in Bulgaria – Sofia, Plovdiv, and Varna, which is also noted by the local government, regional business, and recently by the state. This once again shows that the educational system in Bulgaria is related to the demographic situation of the regions. The imposed model of labor migration has increased many times the number of students from Bulgaria in Western Europe, which in practice will have an additional negative impact on the development of Bulgarian regions, and subsequently will affect the capital and major cities. This trend can be mitigated provided that our higher education responds to emerging trends with a more effective model of governance and training for the regional economy. It is often stated that measures to increase the applicability of acquired education are not sufficiently tailored to the needs of the labor market (European Commission, 2019, p. 9). However, focusing mainly on this relationship creates and reinforces other negative aspects. There is an urgent need for policies that would allow higher education institutions better to consider the trends in the development of the economy and society. However, it is difficult to expect that this is an easily achievable task in the conditions of the modern dynamically changing labor market. Therefore, it is worthwhile for universities to rethink their educational philosophies and make efforts to develop curricula that focus on the acquisition of key and transferable competencies, skills, and knowledge. (Boyadzhieva, 2012, p. 27)

The pursuit of education is a matter of personal choice that should not be ignored. What matters

here is motivation and quality, not number and quantity. Life requires to have more highly educated and more people with high professional qualities. A high level of public education is one of the prerequisites for a stable and functioning economy with high potential. The prosperity of an economy depends on the quality of the workforce, which is determined by the level of education. The level of education of the individual and society is becoming a major factor that can ensure sustainable development. The research conducted by Jigaska and Dobrilova found that 89% of the surveyed students believe that the teacher has a role in improving the quality of education. (Dzhiganska & Dobrilova, 2015, p. 441). The Bulgarian Higher School is a school of knowledge. As before, so now, it continues to be based on the famous classical principles: fundamentality, systematicity, consistency, continuity. In terms of formal, normative, and institutional indicators, higher education in the Bulgarian state is harmonized with that in the member countries of the European Union. This makes it possible for it to join the pan-European higher education area.

In addition, it should not be forgotten that the Bulgarian educational system has sent to the West about 15,000 - 17,000 students who are well trained in elite schools. Unfortunately, the tendency is for these students to stay and be realized there - everything possible must be done to return and work in Bulgaria. The second conclusion is that the future lies in the networks - several large parent universities to manage professionally and competently training in smaller centers. And thirdly, modern legislation is needed, as the current law on higher education does not allow universities to develop. This means that Bulgarian business learns to invest in the education and practical training of its staff in universities. Respectively, this change concerns the strengthening of the higher education-business relationship. In this way, an innovative economy with high added value will be developed. The role and importance of Bulgarian higher education institutions will not decrease in the conditions of intelligent development, specialization, and the concepts of continuing education and lifelong learning. Given the clear trends observed in Bulgaria related to the outflow

of Bulgarian young people going to study in other European countries, as well as a sharp decrease in secondary education, universities need to focus more on creating science. The new conditions suggest that Bulgarian universities become more innovative and flexible by accepting more business professionals to share their experiences with students. Working in this direction the business will see a clear benefit for itself - access to staff. This internship will also provide prepared students for specific business sectors. The final stage of this process is the conclusion of contracts for work with graduating students and technology transfer.

## 6 CONCLUSION

According to our understanding, higher education should receive its regional and local focus. The vision of educational quality is a vision for the development of the educational system. This policy is strongly connected to the vision of overcoming regional imbalances and creating more sustainable regions with a young population. Although the reduction of the birth rate in Bulgaria has consequences for the whole economy. The education sector may be leading in facing the consequences and imposing the model of new development on our national territory. This new policy includes the model of decentralization implementation. This process, as established by

the study of the needs of municipalities and businesses, affects some professions and specialists that must be provided for their normal functioning and development. The main issue here is administrative capacity. This capacity will allow the formation of a critical mass of well-educated staff and a network of active units and institutions for municipalities. This should be a priority of state policy through effective higher education policies, which will have a significant positive effect in the long run. In this sense, the minimum necessary condition for the development of businesses and municipalities is to attract and retain quality staff with higher education. They will guarantee the improvement of human capital and territorial targeting of investments in Bulgarian municipalities. And this policy, in turn, will result in the transformation of municipalities into places with a focus on highly educated people. It is necessary to differentiate the tasks, content, and forms of work with students by their professional attitude and to define the needs of regional development with the presence of academic personnel at the municipal level with a population of more than 80 thousand people. It is important to determine that within the preparatory school students build themselves as professionals, which requires the formation of an active regional economic environment related to the adaptation of young people to the business environment at the local and regional level.

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