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SYNTHESIS REPORT “SOUTH” (SUB-PROJECT 2) BULGARIA, GREECE AND SPAIN

Recent developments in the South Europe labour markets and their effects on Higher Education (HE) curricula and on the communication and intercultural competences needed by HE graduates

Introduction

This regional synthesis report for South Europe portrays briefly some recent societal, economic and labour market developments and the new communication challenges which are caused by these developments for enhancing graduate competence and employability. It particularly focuses upon initiatives taken by the HE institutions in South European countries in order to meet the new challenges and to prepare for potential future needs. The report is based on the national report updates submitted by TNP3-D participants in March and April 2007 from three countries: Bulgaria, Greece and Spain.

Economic, societal and labour market developments

Broader societal and political developments over the last three years have greatly affected South European countries. EU enlargement, migration into European countries, the opening of EU to other parts of the world, and the increasing mobility in the Union, are only just a few of them. Moreover, changes related to the advent of a knowledge-based society with ICT playing a decisive role have led to changes in the labour market and the creation of new job profiles. These changes have had different effects on Mediterranean countries.

An official member of the EU as of 1st January 2007, Bulgaria has faced, over the last years, the challenge of restructuring its economy and has undergone structural and privatisation processes which have resulted in labour force reorientation from the public to the private sector. In the process of developing an efficiently functioning market economy which is able to cope with the competitive pressure of market forces and to get successfully integrated into the global economy, Bulgaria has suffered from heavy unemployment, low living standards, a large percentage of shadow economy (amounting to 25-30 per cent of GDP according to expert estimates), high deficit in the Pensions Fund, social isolation in an unfavourable economic environment and high degrees of

emigration to other EU countries. In fact, ethnic and political problems have encouraged emigration rather than temporary labour migration. To address these problems, the Council of Ministers approved the *Strategy for Employment in Bulgaria, 2004-2010*, a document based on the objectives of the European Strategy for Employment supporting full employment, labour quality and productivity, and a labour market guaranteeing a high degree of inclusion.

Young Bulgarian people in particular constitute a significant part of the underprivileged people on the labour market. The problems they have in finding a job are due to lack of working experience and lack of financial resources; insufficient information, consulting and orientation of young people to entrepreneurship; and absence of effective lending system for young and promising entrepreneurs. A recent survey has shown that the typical average young employee should be able to adapt quickly to new environments, acquire new skills and perform new functions. A particular category of unemployed is the long-term unemployed (for one or more years) who constitute about two thirds of the total number of unemployed. These people are in need of special measures in order to improve their qualification and to get retrained according to new market demands.

In Greece, significant changes have occurred over the last few years both at the level of economy as a whole and in the labour market. These changes are not only quantitative i.e. improvement of the economic and labour market indicators but also qualitative. For instance, the number of salaried individuals has significantly risen while the number of self-employed and of assistants in family businesses has decreased. Moreover, the number of people involved in new or informal patterns of employment is rising. Employment growth has been low in certain areas reflecting the continuing fall in agricultural employment and also a downsizing of firms in the private sector. On the other hand, the Greek economy has seen a boost in some other areas, such as construction activity and business services, due to the Olympic Games in 2004. Over the last few years, Greece has faced significant industrial capital transfer towards Balkan countries due to the low labour costs in these countries, which has resulted in serious distortions of the Greek labour market. About 1,500 small and medium sized firms have moved to other countries, 50% of which towards Albania and Bulgaria.

A recent survey in Greece has identified a significant, and similar to the one identified in Bulgaria, mismatch between the skills workers possess and those required by the employers. Gender, work experience acquired while in school and knowledge of a foreign language seem to be the most important factors which determine the employment status of graduates in the Greek labour market.

Despite its declining trend since 1999, unemployment in Greece still remains higher than the EU average affecting young people and young women in particular. The unemployment rate of women is considerably higher than that of

men. It is believed that the low level of investment in vocational training and research, weaknesses in the education system as well as characteristics of the tax and social security legislation prevent an increase in labour productivity and a faster rise in the employment rates of young people, women and relatively older people.

In the last three years, Spain's economy is considered one of the four leading West European economies. However, significant downside risks remain, including Spain's continued loss of competitiveness, the potential for a housing market collapse, the country's changing demographic profile and a decline in EU structural funds. Continuing challenges include terrorism and unemployment which still remains high.

A cultural feature specific to Spain, as well other Mediterranean countries, is the large support system that families traditionally provide. It is very common in these countries for young adults in their 20s and 30s to continue to live at home and be supported by their parents. However, the situation of young adults (16-24 years) in Spain is considered worrying since they are the ones with the highest unemployment rate in the country, according to a recent survey. Two main factors seem to affect supply for workers. First, legislation on minimum wages affects the decision of firms to hire workers. Second, the quality of governmental programs designed to fight unemployment has a substantial effect on their unemployment rate. These programs have the objective of increasing labour force mobility, improving the qualifications of the unemployed, and providing services that facilitate the job search. It seems that the most important factors responsible for the high unemployment rate of young adults are institutional demand side factors through which the government influences the demand of companies for young adult labour.

However, a mismatch is noted here as well between the skills required by companies and the actual skills that young adults possess. This mismatch exists because the high unemployment rate of young adults increases the attractiveness of pursuing further schooling rather than entering the labour force, which has resulted in an overqualified workforce. What is more, changes occurring in the labour market bring about new conditions and new social needs and they call for a modern educational system capable of meeting contemporary social needs. The fact that the recent education system in Spain has developed at the same time with an acceleration of technological progress and the opening of the Spanish economy has also contributed to the above mentioned mismatch. This has led to a drastic reduction in the relative demand for workers with low levels of education along with a radical increase in the demand for education.

The *Agreement for Better Growth and Employment* signed by the Government, Trade Unions and Employers' Representatives in May 2006 constitutes a remarkable effort to tackle the structural problems of the Spanish labour market. Its main target is to cut back the high rates of temporary employment by setting

incentives for open-ended contracts, especially for disadvantaged groups of workers, such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and long-term unemployed.

Developments in HE curricula and new needs

While there may be some similarities in the language and communication needs brought about by globalization in South European countries, developments in HE language curricula vary significantly even within the same country.

In Bulgaria not knowing a foreign language is a serious barrier for many people who decide to work abroad. This is particularly the case for older Bulgarians who have lost their jobs as a result of the restructuring and privatization of the Bulgarian economy. The situation is quite different for young Bulgarians who have relatively good foreign language training and are ready to move and find jobs in countries offering higher standards of living compared to Bulgaria. In fact, foreign language courses at HE institutions are compulsory in all faculties. Students usually continue the study one of the foreign languages they studied at secondary school. The duration of foreign language courses varies but the minimum is two semesters and includes a short “basic programme” followed by modules for LSP in the respective vocational field. Upgrading foreign language training in HE is currently underway with the help of a number of European projects including projects on teacher training, new syllabus design, LSP syllabuses, the setting up of country-wide networks, computer classes taught through a foreign language, Internet use and others.

Two main factors emerge from the student data which indicate that the potential for a strong integrative motivation among students is not capitalized in HE institutions. First, students are very critical of the 'self-oriented' content of the curriculum which requires students to talk about and share information about themselves as a necessary part of the curriculum, and consider topics such as pets, school routine and pocket money to be too immature for their perceived language needs of the future. Since most students will not use the foreign language outside of the classroom, they suggest that their experience of 'real communication' is at best limited. Second, although students feel they work hard in order to learn the language they are studying, they feel they do not possess the necessary skills in order to communicate in this language.

However, Bulgaria's official entrance in EU has given a new impetus to the launch of a new set of requirements with regard to foreign language skills and competences to make Bulgarian university graduates more competitive on the European labour market. Undergraduates are now more confident that it is now possible to work legally outside Bulgaria. This has contributed greatly to increase their awareness of the need to study languages at all levels of education and, in turn, it challenges university policy makers to undertake

adequate measures to meet the new needs of the students as regards foreign language teaching and learning.

In Greece good knowledge of English has been found to be an important factor for getting a first job in occupations which were not highly vocationalised and for office jobs. However, a recent survey among graduates from Greek universities has revealed that two thirds of the graduates did not have a foreign language requirement in their first degree, and only one third of the graduates stated that they studied a foreign language as part of their undergraduate programme. The languages which were primarily studied are English, French, Italian and German. Still, however, as found in a recent survey carried out amongst graduates of the National Technical University of Athens and employers, HE institutions are adopting rather slowly to the new mix of knowledge and skills required by the emerging knowledge-based economy.

In Spain, many reports and newspaper articles stress the lack of linguistic competence of Spanish citizens. Despite a recent education reform which has introduced the teaching of English in primary school, with the addition of a second optional language of the European Community in secondary school, the overall language learning situation in Spain has not yet improved significantly, with the result that many students still arrive at university with a low level of competence in English and most often at no level at all in other European languages. However, as a result of this reform, there has been some first evidence that, in comparison with previous years, knowledge of English, French and German is becoming more widespread among university graduates. In non-language faculties the learning of foreign languages is rather limited and only related to an exit examination. The exit level of the various programmes and the number of credits for language courses vary greatly from one university/faculty/course of studies to another.

However, a survey by the Institute of Languages in 2005 revealed that knowledge of at least one foreign language, English primarily, greatly enhances the opportunity for employment in the Spanish labour market. In fact, foreign language skills have been found to be most valuable for graduates from the Schools of Business, Tourism and Languages.

Recent developments in the HE curricula aim to compensate for the lack of competence in foreign languages, and action plans (2006-2007) for multilingualism have been implemented with the following objectives:

- To teach subjects in English in different centres and departments.
- To develop language training for university students to facilitate their mobility within the European Higher Education Area and in finding a job.
- To promote the teaching of subjects in English
- To include degree courses in English Philology, German Philology and French Philology as free-choice credit courses.

Collaboration between HE institutions and their social partners

Consultation and collaboration between HE institutions, employers and alumni is not structured in South European countries and there is no system which is implemented in practice. The business sector in Bulgaria, for instance, is not a factor which plays a role in the management system of education and the Bulgarian education system does not yet prepare graduates for the competitive labour market, according to entrepreneurs who complain about not being able to find the most appropriate personnel to work with. A recent survey has pointed out that two thirds of the Bulgarian business people are not university graduates and do not speak or use foreign languages. Hence, they need to employ staff with foreign language skills, usually general knowledge of the language.

It is a comparatively new phenomenon for some Bulgarian HE institutions to establish career consultation centres to collaborate between graduates and employers' organizations. The European Language Portfolio has not become popular among Bulgarian employers yet but it is not uncommon that they expect job applicants to compile their own individual language portfolios to accompany all the application papers. In-house language tests are typical mostly of international companies and language training is provided only by few employers. In most cases, employers often need to support language courses for their staff, due to the growing need for foreign language proficiency in businesses, enterprises, foreign companies and government or local authorities. These are usually provided by private institutions and are run on the job or the institute's premises. Courses may vary from extensive to intensive training, targeted at participants' immediate need to improve their foreign language competencies. In this type of training foreign language providers seek to achieve better results and are flexible enough to introduce technology in the instruction. They mainly work with original teaching packages and focus on developing the general or specific language competencies of their participants.

In Greece, as is the case with other South European countries, language audits have not been a common practice. A recent project funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme has aimed at developing awareness of the significance of language audits and at the training of thirty language auditors in Greece.

Moreover, consultation with companies is rather restricted. Greek firms, which are mostly SMEs, are specialised in low-tech industry or service activities, and due to their traditional management methods they are unwilling to hire personnel with higher educational background. As a result, almost three quarters of graduates are employed in the broader public sector. The missing link is not the supply of high quality researchers but the incapacity of the economy, especially of the business sector, to absorb them. As most Greek firms are unwilling or unable to invest in the training of their employees, they seek young graduates who have enough experience to be immediately productive. The IT market, a developing market in Greece, stresses the importance of work experience and knowledge of a foreign language.

In Spain, Chambers of Commerce have repeatedly stressed the lack of linguistic competence and intercultural skills of Spanish people together with the unwillingness of employers to move from their home country as the fundamental obstacles in the process towards the internationalisation of companies. Despite the acknowledgment of the fact that in an increasingly competitive world this inevitably leads to a loss of share in the international markets and that language and communication skills together with mobility of human resources become the necessary conditions to succeed in a globalised market, limited consultation and collaboration are reported between HE institutions and employers.

Future prospects and needs

The new needs projected in HE institutions in South Europe are much in line with what the findings of the TNP3 subgroup 2 consultation with employers and graduates revealed. In particular, the future needs in HE provision relate to the kind of language and communication competence that will be needed due to the changes in the professional profiles of the whole workforce brought about by internationalisation and globalisation. Country-specific differences may, of course, affect the pacing of the changes. For instance, in Bulgaria new types of industry require professionals of a new type for the local market. It seems that in South European countries lifelong professional development will require modular, flexible educational programmes and effective education of immigrants will gain in importance.

Case studies on the developments in HE curricula and new needs

Three cases studies are reported below which concern new programmes developed as a response to new needs.

1. Bulgaria. The following new foreign language provisions are being introduced at Bulgarian universities for *BA, MA, or PhD*:

- some area studies programmes are taught in English, German or French, although, for the time being those are rather limited in number and are not offered at every BG university;
- subject specialists are regularly invited to attend specialized language courses, in order to be able to improve their language proficiency and to keep pace with the new requirements;
- there is a recent positive tendency for BG universities to become licensed centres for certifying students' language knowledge and skills ;
- the increased flow of outgoing and incoming students within European exchange programmes has led to a sharp increase of the motivation to study languages more intensively;
- the above mentioned developments are the reason for the grown interest in attending additional paid language courses alongside with the ones

provisioned in the curriculum. This has led to promoting the role of university language departments.

2. Greece. The Self-Access Learning Centre of the Faculty of English Studies of the University of Athens was created in an attempt to address students' linguistic and ICT needs.

The Self-Access Learning Centre is equipped with 22 work stations for students who wish to work at the Faculty

The Centre offers students:

- access to the Internet
- access to the e-classes of various courses • on-line and off-line study materials for:
- language development
- remedial language practice
- development of academic literacy skills
- ICT tutorials for the enhancement of computer skills
- seminars on how to use the internet and search for material needed for project work and research papers

Among the immediate aims of the Centre are:

- to provide programmes for self-directed work with the English language
- to familiarize students with self-study techniques
- to make them aware of the technological developments in the area of education, and particularly language education
- to promote self-evaluation and assessment

In the near future

The students will have the opportunity to use high quality (self-) study materials. The Centre plans to participate in funded projects for the development of materials for academic self-study and remedial self-directed learning.

Sources used in the synthesis report:

Updates of national reports by María Luz Suárez (University of Deusto, Spain), Vania Simeonova (Agricultural University, Plovdiv, Bulgaria), Bessie Mitsikopoulou and Doriana Nikaki (University of Athens, Greece)

