

## ANALYSIS OF HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY CHANGES DUE TO COVID-19: THE CASE OF BULGARIA

Yordanka Noneva-Zlatkova<sup>1</sup>   
Alexander Alexandrov<sup>2</sup> 

Received: July 1, 2021 / Revised: October 5, 2021 / Accepted: November 11, 2021  
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**Abstract:** *The paper reviews and analyzes the factors influencing higher education public policy, and the impact of COVID-19 as a possible catalyst of change. The paper creates a definition of the public policy change and examines documents that carry public policy weight, assessing whether they represent changes in public policy which is a direct response to COVID-19. At the outset of the pandemic, the Bulgarian higher education sector was characterized by rigid accreditation standards, reliance on traditional forms of instruction, and poor use of technology and distance learning methods. The authors argue that the pandemic represents an unprecedented and currently underutilized window of opportunity for reforming the education sector and practices – especially where there does not seem to be political will or societal readiness to address – an opportunity that is currently not being utilized. The case is made that the pandemic can (and should) be used to provide the extra push to modernize educational models so that the sector emerges stronger and more resilient for the future.*

**Keywords:** *Public policy, Higher education, COVID-19, Distance learning.*

**JEL Classification** J18 · I23 · D83

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✉ dani\_04@abv.bg

<sup>1</sup> South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, 1 G. Izmirliiev Sq., Bulgaria

<sup>2</sup> South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, 1 G. Izmirliiev Sq., Bulgaria

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19 has sent previously unseen shockwaves across the globe and has had profound and very tragic effects in all countries, showing us in an unambiguous way how truly interconnected the world is, and revealing significant problems and deficiencies of the educational systems across the globe. While affecting different countries and educational systems differently, by its very definition, the pandemic affected virtually all educational systems, even if the effects are diverse for the different (primary, secondary, tertiary) educational levels in a given country. It is an undisputed fact that the majority of students across the globe have been affected:

*The rapid transition from face-to-face to distance learning and school closures due to the global health crisis has massively affected all levels of education including higher education. According to UNESCO's global monitoring of the covid-19 impact on education about 84% of learners - from pre-primary to tertiary education level - were affected in March and April 2020. (Eurydice, 2021)*

The focus of the paper is on higher education in Bulgaria, but references to primary and secondary education – both in Bulgaria and abroad are made where appropriate. For example, the effects of COVID-19 on the school education in OECD member countries are described in detail in an OECD report “The State of School Education: One Year into the COVID Pandemic” (OECD, The State of School Education: One Year into the COVID Pandemic, 2021). The Bulgarian case for effects on school education is presented in the report by Global Metrics, Ltd, entitled “*Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on pre-school and school education*” (Global Metrics Ltd., 2021).

In his piece “Acting on lessons from COVID to bring about deeper change in education” Andreas Schleicher, Director, OECD Directorate for Education and Skills, states:

*This crisis has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in our education systems – from access to the broadband and computers needed for online education, and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to the misalignment between resources and needs. (Schleicher, 2021)*

A survey among nearly 25,000 university students in the spring of 2020, found out that 95% of the students in Bulgarian higher education institutions studied in majors that switched to an online form of education, with over two-thirds of them expressing satisfaction with the created prerequisites for successful completion of the school year. Dissatisfaction with various aspects of online learning is expressed by between 14 and 21 percent of students participating in this form of learning (Open Society Institute, Sofia, 2020). It is important to note that the survey was conducted in the April-June period, i.e., during the first months of the pandemic, and the very first-semester accessing online instruction.

A detailed report of the Institute for Research in Education has reviewed the effects of distance learning and other remote learning forms of education on the effectiveness of school education (Institute for Research in Education, 2020). Throughout its 192 pages, the author presents a very rich set of 129 Figures on the basis of a framework model for assessing the effects of distance learning in an electronic environment or other absent forms on educational effectiveness.

An example of direct support at the level of primary and secondary schools was the project “Equal Access to school education during the times of crisis”, awarded in February 2021 (Ministry of

Education and Science, 2021) with a goal to avoid dropping out of school during distance learning periods. The actions in the BGN 110 million project are directly aimed to overcome the consequences of COVID-19 as they pertain to the technical support of the educational system during periods of distance learning, as well as digital literacy for educators, students, and parents.

By Decision of the Council of Ministers № 184 of March 5, 2021, on the grounds of Art. 91c, para. 2 of the Bulgarian Higher Education Act and in implementation of the Strategy for Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021-2030, the policies for the development of public higher education institutions, the Conclusions of the EU Council on digital education in European knowledge societies and the Rome Communiqué, Ministers of the Bologna Process Member States have decided to launch the National Digital Qualifications Program. The specific societal challenges addressed by the program are related to the need to:

- stimulate the higher education institutions to increase the quality of the offered education and of the educational process itself;
- increase the prestige of the teaching profession among ICT specialists;
- update instructions in order to include innovative approaches and modern learning platforms.

However, based on the above, it can be concluded that the basis of this program is not a result of COVID-19.

In response to the rapid spread of the Coronavirus, which has caused serious disturbances in the social and economic life of all countries worldwide and poses serious threats to human life and health, on 28.04.2020 The Managing Authority of Operational Program ‘Innovations and Competitiveness’ (OPIC) decided to cancel the procedure BG16RFOP002-1.027 “Establishment and development of Regional Innovation Centers” (RIC), which aims to strengthen the link between business and science in the field of innovation, and reallocates the funds of the program to measures stabilizing micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises as temporary measures to provide an effective response to the crisis. It also demonstrates the readiness of the Bulgarian Government to look for opportunities for the implementation of this procedure within the funds of the new programming period 2021-2027. The decision has a direct financial effect on strengthening the correlation between science and business, which Covid-19 significantly impacts.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to determine the public policy changes that result from COVID-19, the study was conducted with the following steps:

- Step 1.** Review of literature on the effects of COVID-19 on education and various policy responses.
- Step 2.** Definition of Public Policy for the purpose of this analysis.
- Step 3.** Desk review of policy changes, reflected in laws, regulations, strategic documents, and ordinances that may draft public policy changes.
- Step 4.** Interviews with university administrators, faculty members, and current and former members of the Ministry of Education and NGO leadership on the policy changes that may be candidates for review.
- Step 5.** Evaluation of the items identified in Steps 3 and 4 for meeting the test of a policy change due to COVID-19 and the time-frame test (March 2020 to June 2021).
- Step 6.** Summary of the findings and general conclusions.

An in-depth study of changes in public policies in the field of higher education cannot be done without clarifying the nature and meaning of the notion ‘public policy’. This is why **Step 2** defines **Public Policy** for the purpose of this article. One can define public policy as the combination of basic decisions, commitments, and action steps undertaken by those who hold or affect government positions. Some popular general definitions of Public Policy include:

- “Public policy is a course of action created and/or enacted, typically by a government, in response to public, real-world problems.” (Rinfret, Scheberie, & Pautz, 2018)
- Public Policy is „the sum total of government action from signals of intent to the final outcomes” (Cairney, 2012)
- Public Policy is “whatever governments choose to do or not to do” (Dye, 1972)

The combination of the three doctrinal definitions above resulted in the working definition for this article – **“the action, or lack thereof, of the government in response to issues in Bulgarian Higher Education, resulting from the Coronavirus outbreak.”**

The narrowing of the definition in this way allows a look through the regulations, laws, and other government-produced and/or sanctioned documents with the goal of selecting the most appropriate pieces for further review and impact assessment.

Additionally, there are two broad ways to look at public policy – through principles and plans of action, and through the specific actions and resulting outcomes. Given the short period since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the speed with which policy actions move through the educational system, this analysis is using the former. As a result, we will look for stated goals, principles, and plans of action in the time frame from March 2020 to June 2021.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After defining the term Public Policy for the purposes of this paper, a list is compiled as a result of Steps 3 and 4 - see Table 1:

**Table 1.** List of documents compiled during Step 3 and Step 4.

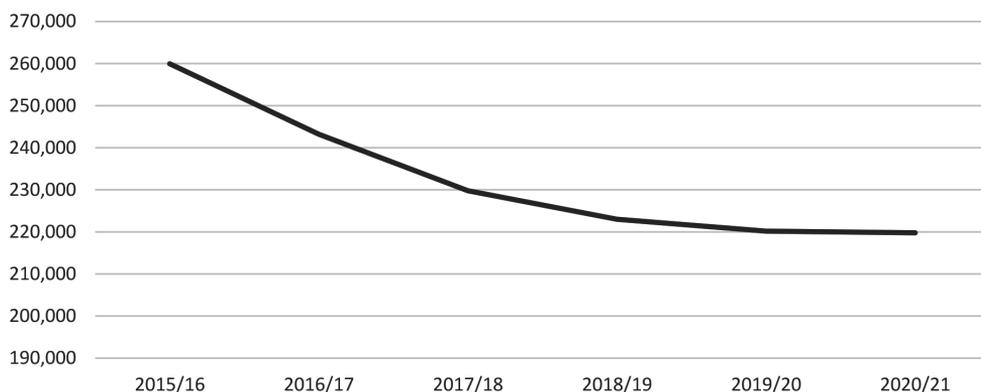
	<b>Document Title</b>	<b>Effective Date</b>
A.	Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria	December 2020 The decision was adopted by the 44th National Assembly on December 17, 2020.
B.	National Recovery and Resilience Plan	February 2021
C.	Ordinance on the state requirements for organizing distance forms of educations in the higher education system.	Promulgated in Official Gazette issue 21, issued on March 12, 2021, enforced on September 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2021.
D.	National Map of Higher Education	June 18, 2021 – draft for public discussion
E.	National vaccination plan against COVID-19 in the Republic of Bulgaria	07.12.2020
F.	Law on Measures and Actions during the State of Emergency, announced by a decision of the National Assembly of March 13, 2020, and on overcoming the consequences	Enforced on 13.03.2020, promulgated in Bulgarian Official Gazette issue 28 on 24.02.2021, last amended and supplemented in issue 36 of May 1, 2021

Step 5 represents a review of the documents from Table 1 with respect to the stated criteria for policy changes due to COVID-19, i.e.: 1) whether they are within the relevant time frame; 2) whether they represent policy change, and 3) whether the policy change can reasonably be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### A. *Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria*

The new Strategy for Development for 2021-2030 builds on the experiences of the previous strategy and adds a 34-page Appendix for the detailed activities, measures, and instruments for the execution of the Strategy. It is the most natural place to see changes in public policy due to the pandemic, partially because it was approved 9 months after the first COVID cases in Bulgaria. However, despite the serious thought that went into the document, and many valid conclusions on the rigidity of the legal framework (Decision for the adoption of a Strategy for development of higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021 - 2030, 2021), COVID-19 was mentioned only in two instances on the 94 pages of the document. Equally importantly, the mentions are simply to illustrate the need for the “urgent digitalization” of Bulgarian education, which in turn may increase enrollment.

It should be noted that the Strategy starts with a review of the state of the Bulgarian Higher Education at the beginning of 2020, stating the progress made, and remaining challenges from the period 2014-2020 (the period of the recently concluded Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Bulgaria). During the 7 years of the strategy, the share of the population aged 30-34 has increased from 26.9% to 32.5% (compared to the goal of 36%). This can be seen as a positive development, even though some see it as a challenge with the demographic challenges (with 2020 being the low point year of high school graduates, with increases projected in the next 7 years). At any rate, the number of students in tertiary education in Bulgaria has been decreasing in the last six years, even if there is some flattening in the last two years (see Figure 1 below).



**Figure 1.** Total Students in Tertiary Education (2015/16- 2020/21)

**Source:** National Statistical Institute, 2015-2021

The Strategy also includes 10 goals and several tens of sub-goals – that are addressing issues of creating new and updating of existing programs, introductions of modern, agile, and effective forms and methods of education, among others, with a major focus on digitalization and “modernization” (without a clear definition). It is worth stressing that the first of only two mentions of COVID-19 in the text reads “With the development of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 almost all HEIs managed to switch to online mode of instruction, using existing, or updated/further developed digital educational materials. This process showed that there is a very good foundation for much more robust

development of digital instruction methods in the future...” (Bulgarian Parliament, 15). The second (and final) mention states “The need of urgent digitization of the whole education, provoked by the COVID-19 outbreak during 2020, only shows how urgent and important the reforms related to digitization in the sphere of Higher Education and all other spheres of life are” (Bulgarian Parliament, 18). These were the only two mentions and none of the tens of goals and sub-goals could be traced to the pandemic. Digitization is presented as an Opportunity in the SWOT analysis and is listed as a “cure” to long-standing issues of quality, cost-effectiveness, and access to education.

## **B. National Recovery and Resilience Plan**

The document that seems most important, and most directly related to COVID-19 is the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. In the document, there is a separate subsection on Education and Skills with an indicative estimate of 1 497.4 million BGN, which seemed promising.

The introduction of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Council of Ministers of Republic of Bulgaria, National Recovery and Resilience Plan (ver. 1.1/8.02.2021)) states:

*In a situation of a high degree of uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting and controlling its spread, as well as dealing with its extraordinary consequences are the main tasks of the Government. The current situation requires targeted measures, and their timely and effective implementation is the key to preserving the economic potential and competitiveness of the economy in the subsequent recovery.*

Yet, the hopes for a comprehensive package to address the COVID-19 outbreak did not materialize, despite the 23 mentions of “COVID-19” in the text. The document that was submitted to the EC contained vague language on improving “the quality and coverage of education and training” and “[m]odernization of the educational institutions to create a more attractive and quality environment for learning and innovation” (Council of Ministers, 23-24)

The updated OECD Recommendation on Broadband Connectivity states: “The Internet has been a lifeline during the COVID-19 pandemic, but without good connectivity, millions of people ultimately face greater exclusion.” (OECD, OECD Recommendation on Broadband Connectivity, 2021)

The National Recovery and Resilience plan does address the issue of broadband access in the section of “Digital Connectivity”. Broadband is mentioned 20 times and there are numerous specific projects mentioned with indicative costs of BGN 1,005.1 million. Upon careful inspection, however, one can attribute the investments to Specific Recommendations from 2019 and 2020:

*The component is in line with the Council 2019 and 2020 Country Specific Recommendations and will directly or indirectly contribute to the implementation of aspects of SR 2, SR 3, and SR 4 of 2020, as well as SR 3 and SR 4 of 2019. The proposed reforms and investments implicitly or explicitly aim to increase investment in high-capacity digital infrastructure with a view to increasing coverage and distribution. This will ensure equal access to broadband-based services, which will improve the possibility of distance learning and work (SR 2/2020). The envisaged measures will create PAGE | 92 preconditions for the realization of the digital transition in the country (SR 3/2020), with indirect expected positive effects in terms of social inclusion (SR 4/2019), e-government, the efficiency of public administration and therefore of administrative burden for enterprises (SR 4/2020) and the business environment in general (SR 3/2019). (Council of Ministers, 90)*

The conclusion is that this section of the plan will have a profound effect on the availability of broadband access and will have an impact on Higher Education and the delivery of instruction, but its origins cannot be traced to the pandemic.

**C. *Ordinance on the state requirements for organizing distance forms of educations in the higher education system***

The ordinance looked promising since it was adopted in the right time frame (March 2021) and is meant to deal with the issues of digital delivery and distance education (both aspects seemed logical for a policy response to COVID-19). Upon inspection, however, the Ordinance seemed to be the (long overdue) update of Ordinance 292 with a similar name from 2004. It is an example of government action, affecting public policy that is not caused by COVID-19 but rather coincides with the outbreak in time.

**D. *National Map of Higher Education***

The “National Map of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria” (in its full legal name) is a tool, envisioned in the Higher Education Act, to determine and anticipate changes in demand for college graduates based on a number of factors. It can be used by the Ministry of Education as part of the decision-making process for approving the creation of new universities and new academic programs/majors within existing universities. It is introduced like a policy regarding the development of the profile and territorial structure of higher education and like an implementation measure of the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria, rather than as a direct response to Covid-19.

**E. *National vaccination plan against COVID-19 in the Republic of Bulgaria***

According to the National Vaccination Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria, the first deliveries of vaccines are intended for several priority groups in the population, defined by the risk of infection and the need to protect critical structures of society. The 89,000 pedagogical specialists, take priority place in the second phase of vaccination. Prioritizing teachers like first responders in terms of vaccination is also a policy - even just as an „emergency response”. This is not the case in some other countries.

**F. *Law on Measures and Actions during the State of Emergency, announced by a decision of the National Assembly of March 13, 2020***

This legal act set the agenda for many sectors in a pandemic situation, including the higher education sector. According to § 24 of the general and final provisions, the terms, established in the Law for the development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Higher Education Act, effective prior to this law, shall stop running after the declared state of emergency ends. The current accreditation procedures, competitions for admission of Ph.D. students, procedures for holding academic positions, etc. fall under the terms of these two laws.

**G. *Other changes and effects***

Additionally, there were a variety of changes and projects that individual HEIs underwent – mostly addressing the shock of the three lockdowns, but also broader effects of the pandemic. Some of these include virtual campus tours, distance application processes, etc. However, they can also be defined as “reactions” and “emergency responses” and do not seem to meet the policy change definition above.

According to the provisions of Law on Measures and Actions during the State of Emergency and Orders of the Minister of Health to declare an emergency epidemic situation in the country due to the spread of COVID-19, the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) begins to conduct its accreditation councils and standing committees from a distance, suspending on-site visits to higher education institutions, and informing them by e-mail about the possibility for conducting assessment without site visits.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Our desk review did not find distinct changes in public policy that are specifically resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown above, some strategic documents, ordinances and other pieces of legislation have been enacted/approved in the period March 2020-June 2021, but we could not trace any policy changes *directly* to the COVID-19 pandemic – at least not at the tertiary education level.

Since the Coronavirus outbreak is fairly recent, we were not able to identify any changes in trends for the overall government support to higher education. Aside from the emergency response measures on behalf of HEIs, and the newly negotiated minimum salaries for the different faculty ranks, as well as change in coefficients used to calculate the government subsidy, there did not seem to be a coordinated, conscious effort that can be labeled “Policy Change”.

Does that mean that COVID-19 and the processes surrounding the outbreak cannot serve the role of a catalyst in the Bulgarian higher education sector? Not necessarily. It is true, however, that the whole Higher Education sector has mobilized and started using course management platforms and online and distance education tools in a truly short time.

The two major, interconnected impacts, with long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the policy response are:

- 1) The realization (albeit forced by the outbreak) that digital education is not “scary” and can be useful – both as a standalone instruction and in hybrid modes, *and*
- 2) Refuting the myth that digital education may serve as a *panacea* for all discrepancies and imperfections of the higher education system.

The combination and interaction of the two effects above give us the long-lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria. It is important to look at the two effects above in a duality setting – on the one hand, there is the forced push to digitization (and a corresponding realization of certain positives of distance learning), and on the other hand is the sobering effect, the end of the romantic belief that the digital education can solve all issues and problems in the higher education system. In other words – “Pedagogy is the driver; technology is the accelerator.” One cannot rely on technology as such, or on a particular method of delivery to solve the issues facing Bulgarian higher education.

#### 5. FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Due to the fact that the Coronavirus outbreak is fairly recent, the authors were not able to identify any changes in trends for the overall government support to higher education. Aside from the emergency response measures on behalf of HEIs, and the newly negotiated minimum salaries for the different faculty ranks, as well as change in coefficients used to calculate the government subsidy, there did not seem to be a coordinated, conscious effort that can be labeled “Policy Change”.

In several of the documents (most notably the Strategy for Development of Higher Education, but also the National Recovery and Resilience Plan) several “proper” and “adequate” mid-to-long-term processes are listed without any clear idea whether they will stay only on paper, as similar ideas have done many times in the past. So, an area of further review in 2-3 years can be the analysis of trends – in overall and per capita funding on tertiary education, the degree of acceptance of distance education by the NEAA and the Ministry of Education, as well as specific, government-sponsored efforts to address/mitigate the long-term effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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