

REFORMS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA 23 YEARS LATER

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Abstract

Despite the hardships it has been experiencing in the years of transition into a market economy and a democratic society, the Republic of Macedonia has been endeavoring to shape its education system in correspondence to global contemporary tendencies. These efforts have been constantly plagued by external and internal challenges that have molded the education system and determined the direction of its future development.

In the first 23 years since independence, a number of interventions were initiated in the education system, primarily on a project level. The goal of these initiatives was the improvement of the quality of education. Unfortunately, most of them were implemented in isolation from each other and in an environment wrought with political influence and tensions, marginalising the significance of the impact of education reform.

Reforms in education have to a large extent followed the foundations laid in: the Phare VET Reform, the National Programme for Development of Education in the Republic Macedonia 2005-2015, various law and bylaws, the Bologna Process in Higher Education, the Nine-year Primary Education Policy, the Compulsory Secondary Education Policy, the Integral Vocational Education and Training Policy, and the national goal-oriented strategic documents for national and local economic development, poverty and unemployment reduction, and strengthening of the culture of living.

Key words: *education, reforms, policy*

In line with the commitments declared publicly by the state, the Republic of Macedonia was to be transformed into a society in which education and training, culture and science embody key factors for the wellbeing of its citizens and the strengthening of its economy. Hence, reforms in education were to facilitate greater compatibility of national standards with the standards of the European Union and wider, development of democracy, growth of civil society and development of the country's contemporary and integrated market economy.

The main goal of Republic of Macedonia's education policy, enshrined in the *National Programme for Development of Education 2005-2015*, is to facilitate opportunities for all and for all age groups to reach a level of education and to ensure that they possess competences meeting the demands of society and the labour market.

In order to achieve this goal, education must be available to all who live on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia, irrespective of their age, gender, religious or sexual orientation, ethnic affiliation, health status and social and financial situation.

In addition, specific preconditions must be fulfilled to facilitate efficiency and effectiveness of education and training so that they can offer sufficient general and vocational education to all.

Faced with the problems of poor educational structure of the population, large number of individuals (over 40%) who have completed primary education at most, poor structure of qualifications of the employed and the unemployed workforce and high school drop-out rate, the state undertook measures to increase the duration of compulsory education. These measures were to facilitate improvement of the level of education attainment among youth, with special emphasis on improving the quality of their general educational, vocational/work-related and their social competences.

Increasing the duration of compulsory education should assist the establishment of a dynamic relation among education, the labour market and social changes. The creation of preconditions for continuing upgrade of qualifications among youth should result in better starting position at the transition from learning to work, retention or change of the job and active participation in the processes of democratic decision-making.

The tertiary sector has since 2003 been undergoing a process of continuing change, brought about mostly by the efforts of the state to implement the recommendations of the Bologna process.

The area of adult education has also seen efforts for seeking solutions for improving this component of the overall education system.

The period of transition of the state has been marked by a number of initiatives aimed at improving the legislation governing education, at introducing decentralisation in education, at adopting development programmes, at strengthening the administrative and professional capacities of state institutions, at establishing professional bodies, agencies and centres, at changing the structure and organisational set-up of the education system and education organisations, etc. All this is a result of the efforts of the state to identify optimal decisions that would enable the creation of a function education system. This period can justifiably be called a period of education reforms.

Why Reforms?

We live in times of pronounced economic turbulence accompanied by crises that are difficult to predict. In 2012, the world faced serious challenges related to employment and a huge deficit of jobs. Three years of continuing crises on the global labour force markets caused increase of unemployment by 27 million since the beginning of the crisis, which, according to ILO projections will continue to grow and reach 206 million unemployed throughout the world by 2016.

In 2011, 74,800,000 youth aged 15-24 were unemployed throughout the world, which is an increase of over 4 million compared to 2007. The global youth unemployment rate of 12.7% was a whole percentage point higher than before the crisis. On a global level, youth are three times as likely to be unemployed as adults. Grim scenarios, in the context of latest developments, project slim chances for significant improvement of the employment opportunities for youth in the near future.

Over 400 million new jobs will be necessary in the coming decade to avoid further increase in unemployment throughout the world. In order to generate sustainable growth and maintain social cohesion, the world must face the generation of 600 million productive jobs over the next decade.

Due to the interlinkages between European economies, the crisis sparked a chain reaction that spared no country from the unwanted consequences in all sectors. As

„Europe 2020” highlights, the economic crisis disposed of the stable values of economic growth and creation of new jobs, which emerged as effects of the last decade in Europe. EU GDP fell by 4% in 2009, whereas industrial production fell at the level of the 1990-ies. This resulted in 23 million unemployed or 10% of the active population in the countries of Europe. Public finances suffered a severe blow, with an average deficit of 7% of the GDP and levels of debt of over 80% of GDP. In simple terms, two years of crisis erased the fiscal consolidation of the last twenty years.

Today’s economy brought to the forefront certain trends that differ from the ones of the past. For example, possibilities for ensuring a lifelong career and job security for workers are shrinking, not only because of technological changes, but above all due to the increasing flexibility in the choice of work. The crisis left great numbers of people without other options, bringing about an increase in the number of self-employed. This made entrepreneurship a “hot” topic in the forecasting of economic development.

Another trend that is causing significant ripples among the general public and policy makers throughout the world is the trend of a growing workforce, which puts additional strain on systems of education and training and job offers. According to United Nations reports, working population has increased in the last decade globally by about 600 million. At the same time, the number of workers in the informal sector is also increasing, which is in direct correlation with economic circumstances. This situation is caused by decreasing birth rates, prolongation of retirement age and increase in the life expectancy of the population.

From all this, it can be concluded that the only certain thing is the uncertainty of the times to come. The new age requires determination and perseverance. Changes in life and work confront us with a serious test to which we must respond in time. Instead of waiting for changes, we must rise with them, meet them head on and do whatever we must in order to ensure economic development and wellbeing for all. The Preface to the European strategy 2020 states “The crisis is a wake-up call, the moment where we recognise that “business as usual” would consign us to a gradual decline, to the second rank of the new global order. This is Europe’s moment of truth. It is the time to be bold and ambitious.”

It goes without saying that in a future which brings unpredictability, our country’s prosperity must be sought in the global competition of ideas, knowledge and skills. We must improve the skills of the population and adapt them to the specific demands of the new economy, and strengthen our capacities for research and development. These are the pillars upon which we must build our future.

Mass production, characteristic for less developed countries, which as a rule has a need for less trained workers and workers with lower level qualifications, by the logic of its demise, directly threatens the economic development and survival of these countries. If we know that automatization and information innovations affect primarily the simplest and repetitive jobs which require low level qualifications, which in turn dominate the mass production, then the fate of the less developed countries is not rosy, particularly in the area of unemployment.

Experts predict that the tertiary sector is the area expected to provide individuals with higher level qualifications with employment. However, given the tendency for simplification of work operations characteristic for the tertiary sector, we cannot rule out the possible emergence of jobs requiring lower level qualifications.

The increase in complexity of work requires worker to know and be able to do much more than simply perform their tasks. They are required to be effective and work in teams. Knowledge-based tasks require workers to possess analytical and decision-making skills. Although the need for high cognitive skills is present among professional, technical and managerial jobs, even administrative tasks require more independent decision making. An essential requirement for workers is to engage in continuing development of their competences.

Team work and conflict resolution abilities and negotiation skills are critical for joint work, since conflicts frequently emerge in collaborative work processes, in discussions on objectives, work methods or assignments, time, workload, recognition and awards, etc. They facilitate readiness to better handle open problems which are an inescapable element of contemporary work processes, to better listen to and understand different ideas and perspectives, and to better resolve issues through mutually beneficial paths. Development of relations and networking and exchange of important information, meeting promises, readiness to influence the development of trust lead to mutual trust and dedication in meeting joint goals.

Can the education system address efficiently these demands? It seems impossible for education to produce workers ready to efficiently participate in the labour market. The dynamics of change in electronics and technology is too strong for a rigid system with slow mechanisms and bureaucratic procedures to be able to successfully follow. The problem is even greater if it involves a centralised decision-making system. Without the autonomy and freedom to quickly make decisions and react to dynamic changes in the area of labour, any education system is incapable of answering these demands. In such a case, the business community will constantly complain that it does not receive workers of sufficient quality and that the newly employed possess good theoretical knowledge, but lack specific technical knowledge, necessary for the respective job.

In general, highlighting the need for narrow profile workers, to the level of narrow-minded one-track specialists, has led to a paradox. The education acquired in the course of ones' regular schooling, due to the time gap of unemployment, cannot be used at the moment of employment because it is out-dated or because the system cannot offer sufficient jobs to accumulate new workers. Also, knowledge acquired in formal education, due to the speedy dynamics of outdated of scientific knowledge, the quick pace of scientific-technological development and disappearance of a number of occupations and professions, loses its optimal value at the moment of its application in the area of labour. Thus, education constantly lags behind the dynamics of labour and instead of being focused on the future, is as a rule occupied with the present.

Reforms in Education

All reforms in the Republic of Macedonia's education system since its independence based their rationale on the responsibility of the state for implementation of general policies pertaining to this area by all actors directly or indirectly linked with education. In this sense, the state undertook responsibility for the realisation of the goals, principles and recommendations enshrined in international documents guiding the development of education in Europe and the world. The strategic approaches, priorities and recommendations contained in: „*Education for All*” (2000), *the UN Millennium Development Goals* (2000), the Lisbon Agenda (1997 and 2001), the Copenhagen Dec-

laration (2002), the Memorandum on Life-long Learning (2000), the Maastricht Communiqué (2004), the Bordeaux Communiqué (2008), the Bruges Communiqué (2010), the Bruges Communiqué (2010), Education and training – 2020 of the European Commission and the *Bologna Process* recommendations present a reference framework which presents goals which the state, and thus its education system, should pursue in the coming period.

In parallel to economic and political interventions, the country has since its independence been facing a number of challenges related to improving the quality and efficiency of education at all levels. Significant efforts were invested to harmonise its education system with and adapt it to standards valid in EU countries.

In the last two decades, the state implemented a number of interventions and activities in education, characterised by several types of reforms of the education system in the Republic of Macedonia:

- Systemic/structural reforms;
- Corrective reforms;
- Modernising reforms; and
- Overall reforms.
- The following interventions were undertaken within the scope of systemic/structural reforms:
 - Increase of the duration of compulsory education from 8 to 13 years;
 - Introduction of curricula of different duration and for different levels of qualifications in secondary vocational education;
 - Establishment of a system of adult education as a constituent element of the overall education system;
 - Supplementing the network of public education institutions with private institutions;
 - Introduction of State Matura and external assessment;
 - Strengthening the institutional capacities for education support (VET Council and Centre, Adult Education Council and Centre, National Assessment Centre, etc.);
 - Expansion of the network of higher education institutions;
 - Efforts for institutional solution to the issues of social partnership and social dialogue;
 - Introduction of decentralization of management and transfer of competences and responsibilities from central to local level.

The following interventions were undertaken within the scope of corrective reforms:

- Development of strategic and developmental documents and programmes;
- Changes in the legislative environment of education;
- Defining of the National Qualifications Framework (standards of occupations, of qualifications and standards for VET);
- Changes in the financing systems;
- Procurement of equipment and teaching aids;
- Strengthening research and innovations;

- Improving the educational attainment level of the marginal population groups;
- Increasing coverage in preschool education;
- Decreasing the number of early school leavers;
- Improving vertical mobility, i.e. increasing the number of secondary school graduates who continue their education;
- Efforts for strengthening adult education.

The following interventions were undertaken within the scope of modernisation reforms:

- Efforts for creating an education system in line with European trends and tendencies at the same time respecting national traditions;
- Efforts for improving curricula (change of goals, introduction of new subjects, of an interdisciplinary approach, adaptation of the curricula to the needs of clients);
- Introduction of standards of competences in preschool, primary, secondary and higher education;
- Teacher training;
- Efforts to create an inclusive school;
- Introduction of information technology in the education process;
- Strengthening entrepreneurship in the education process.

The following interventions were undertaken within the scope of overall reforms:

- Internationalisation and networking of education;
- Educational mobility of teachers and students;
- the Bologna Process / European education programmes;
- Introduction of a European dimension in education.

Question such as: How can an efficient curriculum be built that satisfies the needs of a wider client base (students, parents, employers, education institutions, society in general)? What kind of initial education do teachers need and how can we set up an efficient and dynamic system for teacher professional development? How can school administration be reorganised? What is the role of education inspection? How should information on the work of schools and destinations of student after their graduation be collected? How are relevant stakeholders to be involved not only in the work and decision-making in schools but also in the development of education policy? How is high quality of learning to be ensured? How is effective social dialogue to be established and who should participate? How is efficient management of reforms to be established? etc. still draw the attention of the expert community and the competent institutions.

Is there Room for Complacency?

Have the overall reform initiatives been successful or not can be ascertained only through comparison with other countries' achievements. If we compare data from our

country with the 2020 education benchmarks of the European Union, the following can be concluded:

- **By 2020, at least 95% of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education.** Participation in early childhood education lies at 29.6% against the EU-27 average of 92.3% pointing out that additional efforts need to be made to reach the EU level;
- **By 2020, the share of low-achieving 15-years olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%.** Through participating in PISA 2015, the country will be able to establish its achievement level against this benchmark;
- **By 2020, the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%.** In early school leaving, with a remarkable improvement of 10.8 percentage points between 2006 and 2012 (from 22.8 to 12.0%), the country performs better than the EU-27 average (12.9%). The female indicator is slightly worse than the male;
- **By 2020, the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%.** In the period between 2006 and 2012, with an increase by 10.3 percentage points, the country reached 21% (against the EU-27 average of 35.5%, 2012). In line with trends elsewhere the female indicator is higher;
- **By 2020, an average of at least 15% of adults (25-64 years old) should participate in lifelong learning.** Participation in adult learning lies at 3.3% against the EU average of 9.3%. The country registered an increase from 2.3% to 3.3% between 2005 and 2009 (outperforming many other Southeast European countries as well as Turkey). Data for 2011 show an increase to 3.4%;
- **At least 20% of higher education graduates and 6% of 18-24 years-olds with an initial VET qualification should have had a period of study abroad.** The European Commission's Education and Training Monitor 2012 specifies that graduate data are not yet available for many countries and it is not possible to indicate the level at which the benchmark currently lies. Looking at enrolment data, the country performs relatively well, with 6.6% (2010) of all higher education students enrolled in another EU member state, EEA or candidate country;
- **Share of employed graduates (20-34 year-olds) having left education and training no more than three years before the reference year should be at least 82%.** In 2011, the total country employment rate (population 20-64) was 48.4% (and only 38.8% for females), which compares low to the EU-27 average of 75.2% (and 62.3% for females).

The comparison demonstrates that a certain step forward has been made in Macedonia in individual fields of education, but also indicates that we have not reached the majority of benchmarks, and for some we still have far to go. What are the reasons for this situation?

Each education tier is a world to itself but at the same time also a functional and inseparable part of the entire education system. For this reason, reforms in preschool, primary, secondary and higher education and also in adult education must be viewed in a context of overall reforms in the entire education system. Efforts invested so far were marked by pronounced contradictions and weaknesses, precisely due to the piecemeal approaches and interventions.

Since 1991, we have witnessed a number of initiatives implemented in the education system of the Republic of Macedonia. The ultimate goal of all these activities was improvement of the quality of education. Unfortunately, the majority of interventions were carried out in an environment of intensive political tensions which marginalised the importance of education reforms. Implemented under the shadow of political rivalry, they manifested a number of inconsistencies and faults, such as:

Activities were undertaken without the existence of strategic documents that would clearly define state priorities in the area of education.

Practical interventions were not accompanied by legislative interventions.

In case when there were strategic documents in specific tiers, regardless of their quality, due to frequent turnover of parties and personnel, the ruling party ignored them since they had been prepared by the previous one, and so on...

- Reforms were characterised by poor coordination, slow bureaucratic procedures and inefficiency;
- Reforms were frequently carried out through non-selective hiring of “suitable” national experts, who due to their poor competences did not have the capacity to implement quality reforms;
- To compensate for the “poor” quality of the “national experts”, international experts were hired who were not familiar with the situation in the country, which resulted in unnecessary activities and waste of time and money, or termination of the interventions;
- National and international implementers frequently acted without efficient coordination. Thus, there was overlap and omission in some crucial issues, with significant funds being used on issues pertinent to some other countries, but not for Macedonia;
- Despite the existence of various analyses on the situation in education, a lot of new analyses were prepared, which frequently lead to the same conclusions already present in existing documents. Again a waste of time and money;
- An integrated approach to reforming education was absent in the Republic of Macedonia. Most interventions were limited to specific segments (teacher training, conflict prevention, development of curricula for a specific level, provision of PCs to schools; interventions were made in primary education without linkage to and coordination with preschool or secondary education, VET reforms were carried out without coordination with primary and higher education, etc.);
- A number of initiatives which resulted with positive impact and effects failed to secure their own sustainability.

The enumerated weaknesses that emerged in some previous interventions in the Republic of Macedonia are only some of the experiences that could continue to plague further reform efforts if not eliminated.

It is evident that the key factor for successful reform of education is the people, i.e. all stakeholders (state institutions, educational facilities, the business sector, the economy, trade unions, etc.). Given that the main actors and structures possess the necessary competences and capacities for a successful reform in the education sector, it is to be expected that it can be successfully implemented. Still, a repetition of the same mistakes from the past and a continuation of a culture of non-coordination will inevitably lead to failure. Cooperation has paramount importance in order to:

- reach a consensus around quality as the ultimate goal, to which all else is subordinated;
- eliminate political/partisan interests and influence;
- clearly define priorities;
- timely agree on activities;
- identify funding sources (grants, donations, loans, etc.);
- foresee and eliminate possible obstacles within the education sector itself;
- efficiently utilise the capacities of national experts;
- actively involve stakeholders;
- continue decentralisation in education;
- participate in international competitions.

Good chances for successful reforms in the education sector are guaranteed by the fact that the majority of obstacles and rejections occurring within the educational institutions in the past have already been eliminated. It is evident that those working in education are ready and willing to implement reforms. For this to be achieved, four preconditions must be met:

- Additional funds must be identified;
- Dynamic training of managerial staff must be undertaken;
- Precise and clear national document must be adopted (laws, by-laws, guidelines) to facilitate and support reform;
- Administrative procedures must be sped up;
- Political unity must be ensured and achieved.

The basic principle of reform must be reliance on domestic capacities in its implementation. All outside support and assistance (financial and technical) that supports its implementation is welcome. We can live on the fish that is given to us, but it is far better that we learn to fish ourselves.

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