THE FIRST STUDENTS STUDYING UNDER HIGHER EDUCATION DIGITALIZATION PROJECTS HAVE GRADUATED

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ABSTRACT. This text focuses on the project for modernization of university programs and the digitalization of educational content in higher education: online resources and cloud services in the teaching process. The projects mentioned in this article are connected to the professional growth of both, teachers and students alike, with the idea of bettering their digital knowledge and skills while using digital tools: innovations on which the educational technologies, the idea of an international web of higher education institutions and the possibility for international exchange of experience between teachers are based.

KEYWORDS: modernization, digitalization, lifelong learning, interactivity

One of the most meaningful messages the Ministry of Education and Science sent through implemented projects in the last three years was the series of projects on "Modernization in Higher Education". They started years ago, but the first graduate students are graduating now. For the first time, higher education was digitized on a large scale, covering more than ten higher schools in Bulgaria. One of the goals of this group of projects was for Bulgarian students to be able to get better training in digital and specialized skills, a more comprehensive idea of how they can be more competitive in the labor market, the necessary knowledge and self-confidence, and learning in an interdisciplinary environment. The various programs that were developed under these projects helped. Under these programs, for example, Sofia University cooperates with dozens of partners from Bulgaria and Europe in the field of teaching pedagogy. Moreover, under these programs, training is carried out with teachers from universities in Bulgaria and abroad—Slovakia, Austria, Poland, Romania, etc. In fact, some of the programs are in a foreign language.

One of these programs, developed in English, was "Digital Competences in Foreign Language Learning" jointly with the South-West University (under the lead of prof. E. Stephanova from Sofia University), the University of Shumen and the University of Trnava in Trnava, Slovakia (under the lead of ass. prof. V. Peterkova). In this program, professors from the four universities jointly led different academic courses, applying the possibilities of digital tools (MODERN-A: "MODERNization in partnership through digitalization of the Academic ecosystem" - https://e.modern-a.bg/). This creates opportunities that have been comprehensively applied in teaching recently. First, students can listen to different professors from different European countries, giving new options and perspectives. Second, students at their own university can simultaneously listen to professors from various other universities and majors in their field without having to move to a different country, which is undoubtedly a burden for working students. The goals of these projects included modernizing the curricula themselves, introducing complete digital content, and using cloud technologies to improve access to higher education in the new specialties, which is especially important for students for whom the physical presence of lectures is difficult or impossible. Third, students can enrich their language knowledge and get acquainted with good practices in foreign language learning by applying digital technologies through specializations in Bulgarian and European universities under the Erasmus + program. It is also an opportunity for teachers to participate in short-term specializations abroad and exchange experiences with their colleagues.

Another similar project, developed by the University of Veliko Tarnovo as a leader, jointly with the University of Sofia, the South-West University, and the Technical College in Gabrovo, was the project "Innovative education in the humanities and social sciences through digital transformation and modernization of the curricula at the University of Veliko Tarnovo "St. St. Cyril and Methodius", Sofia

University "St. Kliment Ohridski", South-West University "Neofit Rilski" and the Technical University of Gabrovo in partnership with foreign universities from Greece, Poland and Romania.

According to it, two-semester and four-semester master's programs were developed in philology, history, and media, such as "Digital culture - language, literature, communications," "Digital communications and media," and more. With these programs, in addition to students deepening their digital capabilities, they also deepen their knowledge because using innovative methods creates additional motivation and an environment in which learning becomes a much more attractive activity.

Regarding the new opportunities, these programs have promoted the creation of joint diplomas from different universities for the first time widely in Bulgaria. Part of the motivation for students and teachers was the newly equipped halls, in which face-to-face training in an electronic environment facilitated contact between students from different universities studying in the same program. The projects envisaged training students and teachers to work with relevant digital tools with specialized software, which naturally helps teachers and students to be at the level of their colleagues in Western Europe. Thus, in the competence profile of the teacher, it is assumed that the teachers:

• Possess knowledge of essential competencies in the European qualification framework for a lifelong learner.

• Possess knowledge in the field of strategies and applied policies aimed at developing students' skills.

• Possess knowledge of implementing interdisciplinary training through modern information and communication technologies.

• Can apply methods and forms of work suitable for learning, ensuring the effective acquisition of a foreign language.

• Can critically evaluate the achieved results of the activity.

• Can motivate and integrate innovative pedagogical approaches.

• Find the most optimal and effective way to address the challenges of transforming the collected data skillfully using and combining available information, resources, and capabilities.

• Maintain a high level of awareness of good practices in foreign language education.

Electronically uploaded lectures and presentations undoubtedly help learners use the materials repeatedly outside of class. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 wave has taught us all this; nevertheless, the achievements are lasting and extremely important in this age, and we do not know what our students will have to work on tomorrow.

The integrated nature of the activities leads to optimal use of partners' resources, including sharing teachers for joint curricula, using joint digital resources and electronic libraries, and access to a modernized material base for innovative learning. As a result of implementing the project, the partner universities improve the level of digitalization and digitalization in teaching, which contributes not only to the introduction of flexible teaching methods for distance and mixed learning but also to the improvement of lifelong learning opportunities.

In western countries, lifelong learning is part of the strategies of all higher education institutions. Motivation is particularly important with regard to the humanities, which have been among the less desirable disciplines for study in recent years. One reason is that in the market-oriented model, students do not see their application. In our technological, fast-changing world, it is evident to learners why they should study computer science or nanotechnology, but the meaning of the humanities studies needs to be clarified. Thanks to their connections with computer science, such programs contribute to the humanities moving into an active stage. The creation of integrative centers and programs, joint training, joint use of resources, and sharing are significant for the future of the humanities, culture, and cultural heritage. If we do not actively support the central place of the humanities, they cannot stand in a world based on utility and pragmatism. Moreover, the humanities are those that form thinking, critical people, and people who protect the spiritual principles of the human world. Furthermore, they must not do so in opposition to technological development but in accordance with it.

With the help of digital tools, teamwork skills, and the development of soft skills, such projects help to form thinking, create knowledgeable and adaptable people and help to develop the so-called key skills for our century. Therefore, humanities in a digitalized form can prepare young people not only for work in their main specialty but also for a faster re-adjustment in the dynamically changing present and for a meaningful and dignified life. One way to evaluate any educational scheme is to ask how well

it prepares young people for such a life. Cultivated capacities for critical thinking and reflection are crucial to preserving any democracy. From there, communication, dialogue, and an individual approach, in which the personal element leads, become the basis of most modern training systems. While it is difficult to predict what skills a young person will need in the future to grow professionally, it is undoubtedly clear that those who have digital skills, qualifications that allow for greater mobility, those who know how to work in a team and communicate well, will have more chances and job prospects. It is also quite clear that the education of the future will be more and more based on communication and interactivity rather than be a one-way process of transmission and assimilation of knowledge and information.