

The Challenges in Education System in North Macedonia



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ABSTRACT: Education is a complex social system, which enables individuals in a society to acquire knowledge and skills that will help them realize their life ambitions, but also helps society as a whole to achieve a higher level of economic and social development. The education system is composed of several segments such as preschool, primary, secondary and higher education. It is very important whether each of the segments in the education system fulfills its goals, as well as whether there is synergy and logical connectedness between the segments in the education system. Hence, this article will try to present the characteristics of the different segments of the educational system in North Macedonia, the goals they need to achieve, as well as the challenges they face.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a basic human right and as such it improves a person's knowledge, skills, competencies and attitudes, thus enabling them to have a better life, both professionally and personally. According to the Macedonian constitution, everyone has the right to education and education should be available to everyone under equal conditions (Official gazette 52/91). The education system in North Macedonia is focused on achieving the well-being of students. It aims to achieve inclusive, green and sustainable development, especially of socially vulnerable and marginalized categories of people (NDS-Education 2022: 2). The end product of the educational system is the development of critical thinking individuals, who are active participants in civil society.

In the last 30 years, the World Bank, OECD, and UNESCO insist on connecting education to the economy, to economic activities, and in accordance with that, to the development of required competencies among students. Hence, education in North Macedonia tries to develop generic and key competencies. Generic competencies mean critical thinking, making reasoned decisions, ability to solve problems and change knowledge in real practical situations. Key competences mean learning methodology, innovation and entrepreneurship, civic and social responsibility, cultural awareness and expression, development of communication competences, acquisition of knowledge in the field of mathematics, natural sciences, technology, etc. (Education Strategy et al. 2018: 19). Through the development of the indicated competencies, education can help in the economic development of a particular country, but also in reducing the poverty rate.

A significant challenge for the Macedonian education system was dealing with the COVID 19 pandemic. In addition to the fact that during the pandemic, the educational system reacted quickly and switched to distance learning, the inability to carry out teaching with the physical presence of the schools left its consequences for the possibility of acquiring knowledge and skills by the students.

The most significant document that indicates the policies that North Macedonia will lead in education is the national strategy for education 2018-25. It starts from the existing conditions and sets goals that should be achieved in the field of education. According to the strategy, the education system in North Macedonia is divided into:

- Pre-school education
- Primary education
- Secondary education
- Higher education (Education Strategy 2018-2025; NDS- Education 2022: 2)

We will briefly review each of the parts of the Macedonian education system.

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

The organization of pre-school education (Early Childhood Education and Care) in North Macedonia gained momentum after the Second World War. Immediately after the Second World War, the institutional coverage of preschool children had a social character and was under the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Policy. Since 1947, by the decision of the government, the authority over the kindergartens passed to the Ministry of Public Education and the kindergartens acquired an educational character. The first law on preschool education in Macedonia was passed in 1958. Laws regulating the work of kindergartens were passed in 1974 and 1983. Since 1991, management and organizational aspects of the work of preschool institutions are under the

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responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (Iliev et. al. 2019: 8) whereas learning and teaching components are prescribed by the Ministry of Education and Science.

The role of pre-school education in North Macedonia is socialization, upbringing, education and care of children of preschool age in order to create basis for developing their potentials. It is regulated by the Child Protection Law, adopted in 2013 (Official Gazette 23/13). According to this law, preschool institutions have educational and caring activities for children aged from up to 12 months to 6 years, organized in nurseries and kindergartens. Besides this, children aged 3-6 can attend Centres for early childhood development. Preschool education should be based on the principle of equal access and maximum inclusion of children according to programs designed in line with modern trends in the field of child development.

In 2005, as part of the decentralization process, the responsibility over kindergartens was transferred to local authorities. From the school year 2007/08, the one-year preparatory teaching was included as the first school year of elementary education. Since 2009, the standards for early learning and development of children began to be applied (Education Strategy et. al. 2018: 29).

In 2016, 33.238 children under the age of 6 were included in 64 public and 19 private preschool institutions. Of this number, 174 children had developmental disabilities (Education Strategy et. al. 2018: 12). The coverage of children in organized learning, one year before starting formal primary education in 2018, was 42%. In 2015, that number was significantly lower. Namely, in that year 30.99% of boys and 32.25% of girls attended preschools (NDS-Education 2022: 23).

Compared to the countries in the region, North Macedonia should work on improving the health and psycho-social development of preschool children. Namely, in 2019, the percentage of children between 24 and 59 months with good health, learning and psycho-social well-being in North Macedonia was 81.80%, which is significantly less than in Serbia 97.1% and Bosnia and Herzegovina 96.40. In Turkey in 2012, this percentage was 73.70% (NDS-Education 2022: 23).

One important domain for improvement of the work of pre-school education institutions is the education process. According to the Bureau for Development of Education (2018) there is need for better connectedness between the objectives and contents covered in pre-school and in first grade of elementary education, in order to ensure solid knowledge base among preschoolers and continuity between both sub-systems. According to the Bureau, the full responsibility for pre-school education should be transferred to the Ministry of Education and science, which will contribute in improving the overall quality of education. (Samardziska-Panova et. al. 2018: 141)

In terms of weaknesses, one of the main issues in preschool education is the very low coverage of children of preschool age. In 2019, there were 90 kindergartens in North Macedonia. In addition, there were 21 centers for early childhood development. According to the data of the State Statistical Office of Macedonia in 2014, there were 30.107 children in kindergartens, which is less than 20% of the total number of children from 0 to 6 years old (Iliev et. al. 2019: 12). In general, the percentage of children participating in early childhood education is low, compared to other European countries. According to the Eurydice's Early Childhood Education and Care report on average 36.5% of children aged 3 years and over in North Macedonia were attending kindergartens, whereas the average in the EU-28 countries in 2017 was 95.4%. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019: 67) What is worrisome is that the coverage is the lowest among the marginalized social communities.

For the following period as main priorities for improvement are determined the quality of the contents; ensuring better learning conditions; increasing the number of children attending pre-school education institutions; improvement regarding inclusiveness and strengthening of the human resource capacities. (Petroska-Beshka et. al. 2021).

PRIMARY EDUCATION

Basic education is regulated by the Law on primary education. The law establishing the primary education system was adopted in 2008. The law underwent several changes. This law on primary education guarantees free education at this level of education. The state is obliged to provide all students aged 6 to 14 with free textbooks and transport for students who live more than 2 kilometers from the nearest primary school (Official Gazette 2008). In 2020, a new Law on Primary Education was adopted (Official Gazette 2020).

Primary education in North Macedonia lasts 9 years and is compulsory and free for all students, aged 6 to 14. It is organized in three periods: Grades I to III; Grades IV to VI; and Grades VII to IX. From Grades I to V classes are covering all subjects, whereas from VI to IX grade are covered subject-specific classes. The instruction language is Macedonian, as well as Albanian, Turkish, Serbian, and Bosnian. There are 347 primary schools in the country. The number of schools reaches up to 1000 if regional schools that work as part of a specific primary school are taken into account (Education Strategy et. al. 2018: 12). The completion rate of primary education up to the 6th grade was 98%, up to the 9th grade it was 94%. The rate of children who left school is up to 1%. The rate of children who completed primary education at an older age is 1% (NDS-Education 2022: 22).

In the past period, several new subjects were introduced in primary education. So, for example, the English language subject is introduced from the first grade, the second foreign language is introduced from the sixth grade, the computer work and basic programming is introduced from the third grade, etc. (Education Strategy et al. 2018: 35). Among the more significant reforms in primary education is the introduction of an adapted version of the syllabus according to the Cambridge International Examinations Center in the academic year 2014/15. This reform covered the subjects of mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology.

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In order to respond to the chronic problems of primary education, but also to the challenges caused by COVID-19 pandemic, in the primary education system, the Ministry of Education and Science started implementing the "Primary Education Improvement Project" which was financed by the World Bank. The project had three components: improvement of learning conditions in schools - for which 17.5 million dollars were spent, reform of the monitoring and evaluation of learning, for which 2.3 million dollars were spent, and improvement of the competencies of teachers, for which was spent 3.4 million dollars (World Bank 2020: 12).

The last major reform was done in academic 2021-2022 year, through the implementation of the *Concept Note on Primary Education* and the new curricula (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021) where were defined the key areas for further action. These areas are: acquiring basic skills in math, language, natural sciences and digital competencies; acquisition of transversal skills (critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity and citizenship); learning multiple languages; developing schools as environments safe from violence, hate speech and discrimination. (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021: 4-5). The new concept focuses on better integration of school subjects, use of different learning strategies and teaching materials; valuing student's interest regarding the contents, active participation in school activities etc. (MON, 2021: 8). Due to student's previous very low achievements on international studies, in the new curricula special emphasis was placed on language literacy, with aim of improving reading comprehension (Mihajlovska, 2022: 3) It is expected that this reform in elementary education will contribute for better learning outcomes in terms of improved problem-solving skills, better application of the knowledge in different contexts, developed skills for critical thinking and evaluation of facts etc. Still, one year after the implementation, the new concept is facing with serious difficulties like deficits in school equipment, digital tools, late preparation of learning materials etc.

Regarding the quality of education, results of the international tests show that the results of students from North Macedonia are worryingly low. The PISA tests in 2015 show that students from North Macedonia are on average 4 years behind their peers in OECD countries. Namely, the average score of students from North Macedonia was 384, while the average score of students from other OECD countries was 493. The results show that 70.7% of students aged 15 do not have basic reading skills, compared with students from OECD countries where the average is 20%. North Macedonia has the lowest results compared to neighboring countries, with the exception of Kosovo (OECD 2019). Although the number of students who show knowledge below the basic level on the test has decreased, most of the students are still in the category of showing knowledge below the basic level. At the same time, students who come from families with higher income show significantly better results than those who come from families with lower incomes. Also, girls show higher scores than boys. Data from the EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment) and EGMA (Early Grade Mathematics Assessment) based on the 2017 tests indicate that there are some improvements in reading between 2nd and 3rd grade, but oral reading fluency and comprehension scores that correlate with literacy, are still significantly behind international standards (World Bank 2020: 6). Data from TIMSS 2019 (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) showed that the average score of Macedonian fourth graders in mathematics is 472 points and 426 points in science. Compared with the countries in the region, Macedonian students have lower results than students in Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia, while in science Macedonian students have second lowest results in the region, better only than Kosovo. (TIMSS, 2019)

Among the reasons for the poor results of students in reading and mathematics are limited and insufficient resources for working with students at school and at home, insufficient time for learning, in school and outside of it, insufficient encouragement in the process of learning, not enough provided individualized work with students, not providing assistance to students with lower results, inadequate and rigid curricula. (OECD, 2019) In addition, there is a lack of systemic solutions for identifying and working with talented students, and the worrying fact that there is still a big number of Roma children who are outside the education system. (Education Strategy et. al. 2018: 37).

SECONDARY EDUCATION

Secondary education in North Macedonia is regulated by the Law on Secondary Education. Since the academic year 2007/08, secondary education in North Macedonia is compulsory, free of charge, and the state has the obligation to provide students with free textbooks, transportation and accommodation in student dormitories. Secondary education in North Macedonia is divided into four types: high school, secondary vocational education, art education and education for students with special educational needs. Secondary vocational education can be of three or four years duration. From 2013 to 2017, a system of external verification of student achievements in all subjects was applied in all secondary schools. Since 2008, a state matriculation exam has been introduced in high school and secondary vocational education, which lasts 4 years. Since 2009, the state matura has been introduced for secondary art schools (Education Strategy et. al. 2018: 42).

At the end of the three-year secondary vocational education, students take a final exam and do not have the right to enroll at university. Students completing four years secondary education (gymnasium or vocational education) are required to take the Matura examination, which is required for completing secondary education and is used for entry and placement at university.

There are 124 secondary schools in North Macedonia, of which 108 are public, while 16 are private. Of the secondary public schools, 23 are high schools, 43 are vocational schools, 33 offer high school and vocational education, 4 schools are for students

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with special needs and 5 are art schools (Education Strategy et. al. 2018: 12) In 2017/2018 school year, the total number of enrolled students was 71.458 students, of which 40.39% were enrolled in gymnasium, 58.04% in vocational schools and 1.57% art schools. (State Statistical Office, 2018) The rate of young people who completed secondary education in 2019 was 84%. The rate of young people who completed secondary education at a higher age is up to 1% (NDS-Education 2022: 22).

Regarding the education process, major reforms haven't been implemented in the secondary education for a longer period of time. As a result, the curricula in some subjects are outdated and do not allow the continuity of the cognitive and socio-economic development of students. On the other hand, in order to respond to the needs of the labor market in terms of developing student's entrepreneurial skills, some subjects have been introduced, like business and entrepreneurship and innovation and entrepreneurship. Also, in the school year 2019/2020 was started a process for modernization of secondary vocational education. Namely, *Learning through work* was introduced as a component of the formal secondary vocational education, where students spend part of the school hours in school, acquiring theoretical knowledge, and specified hours in companies, where the focus is on developing practical skills and experience in the profession. The aim of this process is to help the students to make better connection between theory and practice and to prepare for the demands of the labor market, as well as to produce qualified labor force, during the period of secondary education. The Vocational Education and Training Center bears the responsibility in this domain (Ministry of Education and Science 2020).

A weakness of secondary education in North Macedonia is that the curricula are overloaded, some of the textbooks are outdated and contain stereotypes, prejudices, stigmatization and they lack elements of coexistence, respect for diversity and multiculturalism. Multicultural education is not reflected in extracurricular activities. The dispersion of secondary schools is inadequate. There are secondary schools in which there are over 40 students in a class, but there are also those in which there is not a sufficient number of students. Physical access to facilities, exercise equipment and other equipment are at a low level. Doubts persist about the consistency in the evaluation of students. Reforms in secondary education are not entirely consistent with reforms in primary education (Education Strategy et. al. 2018: 44). The poor performance of the education system in North Macedonia is reflected in the productivity of students. Namely, upon reaching the age of 18, students in North Macedonia have spent 11 years in the education system, but they have real knowledge as if they had been educated in formal education for 7.3 years (World Bank 2020: 5).

HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education in North Macedonia is regulated by the Law on Higher Education, which was adopted in 2018. It has been changed about 20 times, and the application of some changes was delayed several times. Many of the provisions of the Law on Higher Education have been criticized by the academic community, specifically by professors and students. Ensuring and evaluating the quality of higher education according to the Law on Higher Education is the responsibility of the Board for Accreditation and Evaluation of Higher Education (Official Gazette 82/18 2018).

Higher education is divided into three levels: undergraduate, master's and doctoral studies. The law on higher education allows for the establishment of state universities, private universities, and universities that function according to the public-private partnership model. In 2018, there were 6 state universities, 1 private-public University, 9 private universities and 2 vocational schools in the country (Education Strategy et. al. 2018: 13). In 2019, 43% of young people in North Macedonia were enrolled in tertiary education (NDS-Education 2022: 23).

On September 19, 2003, North Macedonia became part of the countries following and implementing the Bologna process, which establishes a common European area for higher education. This meant respecting the resolutions resulting from the Bologna Declaration and their implementation in the higher education system. That means, among other things, the adoption of a system of easily recognizable degrees of higher education, that is, the introduction of three cycles of higher education, the promotion of mobility in higher education through the introduction of credits in the evaluation of knowledge and the possibility of their recognition, which enabled the transfer of students (Iliev et. al. 2019: 25).

The quality of higher education institutions is evaluated by the Agency for quality in higher education, which was introduced in 2019. It covers external evaluation, done by the Board for evaluation of the higher education, and self-evaluation, conducted by the institution itself (Official Gazette 153/2022)

The weaknesses of higher education in North Macedonia are the excessive regulation of processes in higher education, which reflects on the autonomy of universities. The mechanisms and regulations for quality assurance are newly established and their effectiveness at this point cannot be proven. The financing of scientific research is at an unsatisfactory level. World Bank data show that in 2020 only 0.38% of gross domestic product was spent on scientific research (World Bank 2022). As a result of all the mentioned weaknesses, the ranking of universities from North Macedonia on the world lists of universities is very low and has a trend of constant decline, which is an indicator of the decline in the quality of teaching and research work at universities.

Weaknesses of the education system in North Macedonia

Analyzing the situation in the education system in North Macedonia, OECD (2019) states that in the past 30 years, improvements have been made in the light of the fact that today the education system covers a larger percentage of the population, and students

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stay in school for a longer period of time than before. In the same period, significant educational institutions such as the National Examination Center (NEC) and the State Education Inspectorate (SEI) were established. However, in comparison with the educational systems in other countries, the Macedonian education system shows serious weaknesses. The shortcomings of the education system in North Macedonia according to the National Development Strategy are:

- Lack of continuity in the implementation of reforms. Constant initiation of new and different reforms when changing the leading people in the educational system. Rarely is a reform implemented in its entirety in order to perceive and analyze its results.
- There is not enough quality staff in educational institutions. Higher-quality staff from the educational system leaves it and go to better-paid work positions outside of education.
- The reputation of teachers/professors and the educational system as a whole is damaged.
- Absence of a long-term plan for continuous professional development of teaching and administrative staff.
- Outdated curricula and plans, especially in secondary education. There is a need to design new programs that will take into account the recommendations of international institutions and the demands of the labor market. Particular attention should be paid to the development of digital, entrepreneurial and business competencies, as well as to the development of innovative thinking and improvement of life skills.
- Insufficient budget for financing the education system. In the last 10 years, the percentage of the education budget in relation to the country's GDP has been constantly decreasing. For example, the budget for education in 2016 was 3.7% of GDP, which is significantly less than in 2011, when it was 4.6% of GDP (OECD 2019). The sector of higher education is particularly poorly financed.
- Insufficient coverage of children in preschool education.
- Insufficient involvement of the business sector in creating programs for secondary and higher education.
- Lack of training for adult education and deficient profiles.
- Absence of a system for evaluating and monitoring the progress of educational reforms and processes (NDS-Education 2022: 17).

A serious shortcoming of the education system is that most institutions that measure the quality of education do not have data for North Macedonia. For example, for North Macedonia there are no data from the most prestigious report on the quality of education "Education at a Glance" published by the OECD. Also, there are no data for the majority of the 4400 indicators according to which the World Bank measures the quality of education for North Macedonia. In the report "Education in Europe - key sub-data 2020" there is no data for the Republic of North Macedonia. In Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2021/22 – Non-State Actors in Education: Who Chooses? Who Loses?", there are no data for a large number of indicators for North Macedonia. It indicates that there is a weak international cooperation with the institutions that are in charge of measuring and comparing the quality of the educational system at the international level. An additional problem is the lack of development of the mechanisms that would collect the data for the indicators required by the international organizations that deal with the evaluation of the quality of education at international level.

CONCLUSIONS

The shortcomings of the educational system have a serious reflection on the social reality. Namely, among people who have no education or only primary education, the percentage of unemployment and poverty is significantly higher than among people with advanced higher education. Hence the constant attempts to correct the situation in the educational system in North Macedonia. From the 1990s until today, we have seen numerous reforms aimed at improving the quality of education. Unfortunately, most of the reforms were implemented in an atmosphere of intense political tensions, which contributed to the fact that a large part of the reforms were not accepted by all political parties and consequently, were not fully implemented. It seems that political parties are using the education system as a tool in their struggle for power. In order to improve the quality of the education system, it must be depoliticized. Other measures to improve the educational system should include:

- Continuity of reforms until they are fully implemented. Situations in which new reforms begin without the previous ones being completed should not be allowed. Careful long-term observation and evaluation of the process of implementing changes should be an integral part of the reform process;
- When making reforms, care must be taken to ensure that experiences taken from other countries are adapted to the conditions in North Macedonia and combined with good practices in the Macedonian education system;
- Educational reforms should reflect the needs and to be in accordance with the demands of the economy;
- Significant increase in coverage of children in preschool education;
- Improved curricula and study programs, in accordance with social-economic changes;
- The most important product of the education system is to develop knowledgeable and skilled young people who will have the necessary competencies to join the labor market;

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- Greater concern for teachers and professors, for their career development and taking incentive measures to improve teachers' social status;
- Provision of more adult training programs.

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