

VET¹ AS AN EDUCATION PATHWAY AND THE SCHOOL TO WORK TRANSITION FOR BULGARIA'S RURAL YOUTH

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This paper focuses on vocational education as a catalyst for the entry of young people from rural areas into the labour market. The analysis presents an assessment of the state of professional training from the point of view of the quality of graduates' practical training and its compliance with the requirements of the labour market. The study presents the perspectives of three types of social entities relevant to entering the labour market – vocational schools, businesses and local government. The purpose of the paper is to highlight the specific features of the assessments and opinions of the various actors in a substantive plan and to present the possibilities generated by professional education, such as creating a link between the supply and demand of skills. The smooth transition from education to employment of young people from rural regions is required to lower the percentage of NEETs in rural settings and to generate a better rural environment.

Keywords: VET; school to work transition; Bulgarian conditions; life course; rurality.

INTRODUCTION

Entering the labour market is a very important transition in the life course of young people. Vocational training is an education pathway that shields many young people from the risk of becoming unemployed and falling into the NEETs group. Starting a job is an event that represents an intersection of various circumstances: the supply of appropriate skills and practical training, as well as the

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¹ VET – Vocational education and training

demand for relevant qualifications in the labour market (Benneworth *et al.* 2010). Vocational schools and high schools, insofar as they provide direct entry into the labour market thanks to practice and dual education, can be seen as more adaptable to certain segments of the labour market compared to general secondary schools (Simões *et al.* 2020).

This paper is a study of the opportunities and constraints related to vocational schools as an institutional environment preparing young people from rural areas to be competitive in the labour market. In general, the Bulgarian village is a reality characterised by reduced opportunities and underdeveloped infrastructure, the migration of young people to the cities, depopulation, the closure of schools and population ageing. Rural communities in Bulgarian conditions are characterised by their small numbers in terms of population, their ageing population which is insufficiently educated and engaged mainly in agricultural activity. In these conditions, vocational education is a good option for the rural youth, shielding them from entry into the group of rural NEETs and ensuring their integration and social inclusion.

This paper advances the following research questions: Is vocational education and training effective enough in terms of its ability to form transferable skills? How is training in vocational schools evaluated from this point of view by the various groups of social actors: employers, students and politicians who are direct stakeholders in the study-work transition?

The analysis provides an assessment of the condition of vocational education based on the quality of graduates' practical training and its compliance with labour market needs. The study presents the perspectives of three types of social entities relevant to the entry of young people in the labour market – vocational schools, businesses and local government. The objective of the analysis is to highlight the specific features of the assessments and opinions of the various actors in a substantive plan and to present the possibilities generated by professional education, such as creating a link between the supply and demand of skills. The smooth transition from education to employment of young people from rural regions is required to lower the percentage of NEETs in rural settings and to generate a better rural environment.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Literature review

Vocational training is a symbiosis between teaching, learning and training in formal education. The formation of practical skills in the overall educational preparation is one of the important factors for entry into the labour market (Allmendinger 1989). Vocational education is described as education that promotes the acquisition of knowledge and skills for the labour market. The vocational

education system in Europe, particularly in the EU, is divided into three major tracks: vocational and technical schools, formal apprenticeships, and the dual apprenticeship system (Simões *et al.* 2020).

Vocational education is a process through which systematised knowledge, skills, values and activity models are purposefully disseminated, where socially significant qualities are built, and the growing individual is formed and socialised. Skills for a specific professional field or occupation have a special place. Vocational education is socially determined in all its dimensions: goals, functions, curricula, practices.

Effective training must be integrated into the work process. By integrating work and learning, people learn in the context of their work (Sachs, 1995). There are three approaches to training: (1) the traditional approach, (2) the experimental approach, and (3) the performance-based approach (Rama *et al.* 1993). The different approaches change the perspective of the training itself and how it is conducted. In the traditional approach, the trainers' role is dominant and they determine the overall process of imparting skills and knowledge. In the experimental approach, the focus is placed on the experience and the individual learners' perception and gradual progress. In the third performance-based approach, the focus is on performance and results, which are the most important indicators of training effectiveness.

Work integration and skill acquisition can be achieved through a variety of means, such as:

- dual training, where the training takes place at the workplace through mentors who supervise and guide the trainee in the work process itself. Dual training represents a combination of skill formation in both a work and educational environment.
- different types of internships or practices, which can be of different duration and represent periods in which trainees are involved in a particular work environment and acquire specific qualifications.
- learning that takes place in the school environment itself – in laboratories, workshops and other skill-building facilities. Trainers are the teachers themselves who are part of the formal system.

A defining principle of the organisation of modern educational practice is the idea of lifelong learning. Accordingly, the learning process is understood and constructed as continuous, tolerating all pursuit of knowledge and at each of its stages remaining open to people of different ages, with a different education or professional status.

There are various approaches in vocational education that provide a solid basis for acquiring transferable skills, teamwork, and self-discipline. Dual education, which is the focus of the empirical analysis of this paper, represents practical learning in a work environment and is widely applied in vocational education to promote the acquisition of specific professional skills. To address the

labour shortage, young people (particularly young women) in rural regions in most EU nations choose vocational education over their urban counterparts (Simões *et al.* 2020). In this regard, dual education represents one of the means of reducing the share of rural NEETs and creating a sustainable life.

Professional education is one of the options open to individuals to embark on a life development path and create their own life trajectory (Elder 1998). Various changes occur throughout the life course, with the transition from education to employment being one of the most critical (George 1993). A life transition is the concept of change and most commonly comprises a number of life events and behaviours that occur in a person's life (Walther *et al.* 2022). These are characterised by accelerated changes: the transition from one period of life to another, from one social role to another, compared to the relative stability of the stages (Levi *et al.* 2005). An important feature of life transitions is their internal structural logic. Thus, there are linear and non-linear transitions, the distinction being the result of the influence of cultural, economic and social changes which lead to the weakened role of tradition and the enhanced importance of the individualisation process. Hence, for example, the traditional predictable (linear) transition from youth to adulthood is replaced by a so-called biography of choice, in which the personal choice of the individual becomes more and more important in the course of building the life path, and the stability of the tradition loses its meaning (du Bois *et al.* 2003). The term status transition reflects a turning point in life experienced by the individual which changes the personal social status and affects further development. An example of such a transition is the completion of education and starting a first job. This transition is influenced by previous experiences and actions in different contexts, as well as by the influence of the individual's significant others (Walther *et al.* 2022).

The main players in Bulgaria's vocational education

The stakeholders involved in the development, implementation and coordination of VET include representatives at national, regional as well as local levels. At the national level the main actors are the Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, National Employment Agency, National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Economy. The main social partners – the nationally representative employers and employees' organisations are also involved in VET. The third type of actor is the NGO sector.

According to the Vocational Education and Training Act (Art. 2), the VET system creates conditions for the acquisition of a professional qualification and its continuous improvement. The Act defines the organization, management and financing of the vocational training system within and beyond the formal education system (also for students over the age of 16 years), creates vocational training institutions and entry exams for students and develops state requirements for

vocational education. It also determines the structure of the vocational education programs.

At the political level, serious steps are being taken to strengthen the role of dual education, which includes practical training in a real work environment and training in an institution. Although the universal introduction of dual education is still to come, the new changes envisage that general secondary education, which have vocational classes, will also be included in work-based learning. In 2017, a total of 120 schools (or around $\frac{1}{4}$ of vocational schools) were of this nature, and the students therein (almost 4 thousand students) were educated according to the dual education system.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on a national survey that was conducted in 2020. The aim of the survey was to track the state of preparation in vocational schools, as well as their capacity to successfully transition their students from education to employment. Professional employment is one of the prerequisites for well-being and sustainability, and the more actively people are socially included, the lower the share of NEETs is likely to be. Thus, our attention was geared towards vocational education and its opportunities to develop professional and soft skills (McLoughlin *et al.* 2002). Two methods were used:

- An online survey conducted in October 2020, involving a total of 204 respondents – employers; teachers in vocational schools; representatives of local government and local municipal administrations. The ratio between the representatives of the three sectors that participated in the study was as follows:
 - 52.9% were business representatives, around half of whom were entrepreneurs in rural regions and had a business in the village; in other words 24.5% of the entire sample.
 - 32.4% – were representatives of the local government and municipal administrations, of whom almost half were from rural areas; that is 14.7% of the entire sample.
 - representatives of educational institutions – 14.7% – consisting of teachers from vocational schools (located in cities), where students from rural areas are also trained.

Thus, the survey respondents also express the point of view of the people from rural regions – local authorities, entrepreneurs and trainers, who are concerned with the sustainability of the quality of life in rural conditions.

- The second method was based on focus groups with vocational high school graduates, held in June 2020. Two focus groups were organised with young people who had completed their vocational education and their views of the programme, future plans, and attitudes concerning life in rural

areas were discussed. An important topic addressed was – returning to the village and binding them to the rural environment as a form of subjective activity.

RESULTS

Online survey: the quality of professional training and its compliance with the requirements of the labour market

The overall assessment of those participating in the survey from all three of the categories under study regarding the extent to which the professional qualification of vocational school and high school graduates corresponds to the specific needs of the labour market can be defined as “partially corresponding”, as a little over half of all the respondents (61.8%) shared this opinion. The remaining one-third (35.3%) were of the opinion that the professional qualification of vocational education graduates “fully corresponds” to the needs of the labour market. Those who answered stating that the vocational qualification of vocational school graduates “does not fully correspond” to the requirements of the labour market represented an insignificant share (2.9%).

These results underline the existence of a known problem with the quality of professional education in Bulgaria. What are the reasons with which the respondents substantiate this opinion on the quality of the professional qualification of VET graduates in Bulgaria? Arranged in descending order, the reasons are narrowed down to the following (*Table no. 1*).

Table no. 1

Reasons for the lack of correspondence between the quality of the graduates’ professional training and the needs of the labour market

Reasons for the lack of correspondence between the quality of the graduates’ professional training and the needs of the labour market	Share of respondents who indicated the relevant reason²
There are insufficient practices and internships for students in companies	68.6%
Curricula do not include sufficient practice-oriented components	58.8%
Businesses are not actively involved in curriculum design and course selection	55.9%
VET is not sufficiently linked to practice/training modules in a real work environment	45.1%

An analysis of the stated reasons points to their combination into several thematic groups, the most important of which, in the opinion of the respondents, are the lack of sufficient internships and practices, as well as practically-oriented

² The sum of the percentages exceeds 100 as the respondents provided more than one answer.

components in the curricula, which translates into – under – effective practical training. In general, conducting training in a real work environment involves dual training which, according to the respondents, is still not sufficiently well implemented and does not create enough opportunities to achieve a match between the professional qualification of the graduates and the needs of the labour market.

The existence of a “partial match” between the supply and demand of training and skills raises the issue of the changes that need to be made in the VET system to ensure a greater match between graduates’ vocational qualifications and the needs of the labour market. The respondents’ opinions are structured in reverse order (*Table no. 2*).

Table no. 2

Required changes in the VET system to increase graduates’ career and personal fulfilment.

Necessary changes in the VET system to improve the professional and personal fulfilment of graduates	Share of respondents who indicated the relevant change³
More time for training in a real work environment (in a company, institution, etc., type of organisation)	76.5%
Inclusion of more companies and employers in training	55.9%
Applying foreign experiences and best practices for more effective VET	53.9%
Involvement of tutors/mentors from businesses and the real economy in the training process	53.9%
More digital learning methods and content (e-courses, distance learning, internet platforms, etc.)	41.2%

As may be seen, in this case, the enhanced involvement of businesses and employers in the implementation of dual training emerges as a necessary change in the VET system. On the other hand, more than half of the respondents reported the need to borrow foreign experience and best practices to improve the quality of education. The presented results show the awareness of the interested parties – education, local government, business – of the quality of the professional and dual training needed in a real work environment to reduce the gap between professional training and the needs of the labour market in order to achieve a more successful entry of young people in labour relations. The opinions and evaluations of dual training are also presented below.

It is noteworthy that the level of knowledge of the dual education model on the part of the business and local government representatives is high. Overall, 89.2% of respondents claimed to be familiar with the dual education model and only 10.8% stated that they had no knowledge of it. At the same time, those participating in the research not only confirmed having knowledge of the dual

³ The sum of the percentages exceeds 100 as the respondents provided more than one answer.

education model, but two thirds of them (63.7%) also reported being familiar with specific dual education practices applied in other countries. The same share – 63.7% – of respondents confirmed their awareness of current professional training regulations, while only 17.6% claimed not to know them, and approximately the same percentage – 18.6% – were unable to judge and hesitated in their answer. The share of respondents regarding the specific benefits of dual education for the country's economy are as follows:

1. Increases the chances of young people entering the labour market – 90.1% of respondents (only 2% responded negatively, which is negligible);
2. Contributes to reducing unemployment in the country – 86.3% of respondents (only 3.9% responded negatively);
3. Helps to limit the depopulation of rural regions and settlements in the country – 80.4% of those surveyed (only 2.9% responded negatively).

On this basis, the respondents confirmed their opinion that dual education has a future in Bulgaria – 87.3% (only 2% did not see a future for dual education in Bulgaria).

The respondents associated the future of dual education, on the one hand, with the more active involvement of the business sector in the educational process which, in their view, can be achieved through (*Table no. 3*).

Table no. 3

Inclusion of the business sector in the educational process.

Inclusion of the business sector in the educational process	Share of respondents who indicated the relevant condition⁴
Provision of more conditions for educational practices and internships	87.3%
Provision of mentors in the workplace	59.8%
Involvement in the development of curricula and plans	57.8%
Offering new learning content and knowledge in the studied disciplines	53.9%
Participation in planning the organisation of practical training	21.6%
Participation in the examination committees of graduating students	7.8%

On the other hand, according to the opinion of the survey participants, the future of dual education in Bulgaria is also related to the more active involvement of local authorities in the promotion of this type of education – an opinion shared by 91.2% of the respondents.

⁴ The sum of the percentages exceeds 100 as the respondents provided more than one answer.

Referring to the future of dual education in Bulgaria and envisioning concrete benefits for our country, the respondents insisted on the need for a broad explanatory campaign among the Bulgarian society as a whole regarding the benefits of dual education, its legal regulation and specific features. 97.1% of those surveyed shared this opinion.

The survey script consisted of specific blocks of questions targeting the representatives of each of the three sectors under study: business, education, and local government. Thus, a deeper penetration into the specific features of the evaluations of each of the three social actors regarding the quality of VET was achieved, given its compliance with the requirements of the labour market.

Business views

Business representatives (108 persons, 50 of whom have businesses in the village) reported having to provide additional training for newly appointed graduates (from vocational schools and high schools) so that they can adapt to the specifics of the work process in the company. This is an indicator of companies' efforts to adapt young professionals to the requirements of the working environment. On the other hand, 96.3% of the employers regarded training in a real work environment as the main means of achieving quality professional training and in their view, practical training creates advantages for the company itself. There were no differences in the employers' opinions by region, suggesting that respondents with businesses in the village and in the city share an identical opinion. Employers understand that the participation of businesses in dual education not only provides a real work environment for the training process, but also:

[1] participation in determining the curricula in accordance with the specific features of the regional economy, according to 92.6% of the surveyed employers;

[2] participation in the planning of practical training and compliance with the specific needs of the business by graduates with particular professional qualifications – 94.4% of the respondents shared this opinion.

The surveyed business representatives also expressed their view regarding the adequacy of introducing the dual form of education in various specialties of the economy:

1. mechatronics – mentioned by 63% of the respondents;
2. chemical industry – indicated by 57.4% of respondents;
3. tourism – indicated by 55.6% of the respondents.

Among the specialties indicated by the business representatives as suitable for introducing a dual form of education are: the mining industry, security, accounting, electrical engineering. The most synthesised assessment of the importance of dual education from the point of view of business is the opinion shared by 94.4% of the respondents that “dual education can provide qualified specialists for the local economy”.

Hence, business employers envisage realistic opportunities to increase the quality of VET by improving dual education, in which there are benefits for both the trained specialists and the companies from the real economy and for the economy of the country as a whole.

The local authority

The representatives of the local government and local municipal administrations (consisting of 66 individuals, 30 of whom from rural regions) also expressed their support for dual education. Their commitment, as in the business sector, is envisaged in:

a) participation of municipal administration/local government representatives in determining the curricula in accordance with the specific needs of the regional economy – 75.8% of the respondents shared this opinion;

b) considering the specific business needs of trained specialists with a particular professional qualification when planning practical training in vocational schools and high schools, – this was the opinion of 87.9% of the respondents.

The local government's support for dual education is evident, insofar as it expresses readiness for the appointment of specialists who have graduated from vocational high schools in the structures of the municipal administration. This opinion was shared by 84.8% of the local government representatives. Thus, although to a lesser extent compared to the business sector, the local government's support for dual education is indisputable, especially considering the categorical readiness to undertake specific practical actions in this direction.

Position of educational institutions

The representatives of education (corresponding to 30 respondents in the sample) were teachers from vocational schools and high schools who teach students from rural regions. It should be noted that practical training in vocational schools is organised on the basis of a partnership between one or more employers and a vocational training institution, with the aim of training through work. In vocational high schools, dual education is organised in the 11th and 12th grades for students who have turned 16 years. The training is carried out on the basis of admission through a request by the employer to the director of the relevant institution that implements the training. Thus, good partnerships between business and VET institutions are essential. 60% of the interviewed representatives of educational institutions confirmed having established permanent contacts with companies and business organisations. The VET respondents expressed full support for dual education and its implementation regardless of the profile of the vocational school or high school.

More details regarding the specific nature of the practical actions undertaken is provided in the responses of the surveyed participants regarding the ways in

which companies and business organisations are involved in the educational process (*Table no. 4*).

Table no. 4

Practices of involving businesses and organisations in the educational process

Practices of including companies and business organisations in the educational process	Share of respondents who indicated the relevant practice⁵
They provide hands-on learning for students throughout their studies	95%
They participate in the organisation of training	30%
They carry out joint activities	20%
Business representatives teach classes	33.3%
They do not participate in any form	6.7%

As highlighted by the results, the most common practice through which companies and business organisations participate in the learning process in VET is the provision of practical training for students during their studies. All this suggests that dual education is perceived as an opportunity to increase the quality of the educational process and provide competitive skills that support entry into the labour market, as well as maintaining regional stability. The teachers reported not always having feedback from the graduates, but in general considered the transition of vocational school and high school graduates to the labour market to be good.

One of the problems of dual education in Bulgarian conditions is that it is not implemented in all vocational schools and high schools. The reason is that, in general, the majority of the companies are small, with limited financial resources, and it is difficult for them to cope with the economic situation. An additional feature of dual education is the monetary reward that students receive for their work. In Bulgarian conditions, it is precisely the large enterprises or companies with Western participation or project financing that are the real partners in dual training. Apart from the participation of business in dual training, the formation of practical skills takes place in the vocational schools themselves, which have their own production bases, workshops and laboratories where the practical training is held.

Focus groups: rural students and their attitudes

Within the framework of the study of vocational schools and the accomplishments of their graduates in the rural environment, two focus groups were held with rural youths – vocational high school graduates.

⁵ The sum of the percentages exceeds 100 as the respondents provided more than one answer.

One focus group was held on 22 June 2020 with students who had graduated from: the Vocational High School of Electrical Engineering and Construction, Targovishte, and the Vocational High School of Agriculture, Targovishte, which implements dual education. There were 11 participants, divided by gender: 9 male and 2 female youths.

The other focus group was held on 24 June 2020 with students who had graduated from the Professional High School of Transport and Light Industry, Omurtag. There were 8 participants, divided by gender: 4 male and 4 female youths.

The main topics discussed were related to the quality of vocational training, opportunities to enter the labour market and start work, satisfaction with training, returning to the village, the conditions that the rural environment provides as prerequisites for sustainability and well-being. The results of the two focus groups are summarised below.

Quality of training

Most of the respondents reported wishing to study at this particular school and were satisfied that their studies had been held there.

“At home, my parents and I discussed what I should study after finishing the 8th grade and we decided that the agricultural high school would be the best for me to study, so I headed here” (male).

“I think that the training I have undergone and the skills I have acquired in the field of the sewing industry will serve me well, I already have a job and I think I have made a good choice” (female).

“The training put a lot of emphasis on practice, learning to drive all types of motor vehicles, that’s what I wanted, to be able to work as a driver in any field I wanted” (male).

Most of the respondents reported already having a job and having found a company to work for. The reason is undoubtedly that the vocational high schools in which they studied equip them with practical skills geared towards professions that they find rewarding. It should be noted that satisfaction is expressed with the training itself and the acquired habits and skills.

“Yes, I am satisfied with the training and the teachers, including the practice teachers” (female).

“In my opinion, the training is good, the teachers demanded a lot while we were studying, but I don’t have any complaints” (male).

The return to the village

This is an essential question that was also addressed in the focus groups. Most of the participants planned to return to the village to be close to their parents

and family and to support them, while living and working in a familiar environment.

“Yes, I’m definitely going back to the village because that’s where my family is, I plan to start my own family, have children, that’s good for me” (female).

“I have already found a job in a sewing workshop which is in the village and I will be back” (female).

“My profession is related to agriculture, and my place is in the countryside, so I’ll go back there” (male).

Some of the respondents plan to start their own business by returning to the village, using local labour and thus giving other people a chance to work.

In practice, all the young people who graduated from the vocational high school in agriculture planned to return to the village, which creates a good opportunity for the revival of the villages in Bulgarian conditions.

In this context, it is worth adding another emphasis related to ethnicity and values. In general, North-eastern Bulgaria, where the two focus groups were held, has a compact Turkish population. In the region of Targovishte, the surrounding villages have a very high percentage of Turkish and Muslim populations. One of the main features of this ethnic community is its internal integration and elevation of the family to one of the main positions in the value structure. Family upbringing and the intergenerational transmission of its importance, as a significant part of tradition, creates the pattern in which children are socialised and then enact behaviours that gravitate primarily around the family structure, such as devotion and empathy. The respondents referred to family and parents being important to them, feeling good in the village and the intention to return there since that is where they belong.

From this point of view, it can be said that vocational education, at least in the cases of the focus group participants, has fulfilled its function and contributes to these prepared and trained young people who have a profession and benefit the community by returning to rural conditions and continuing their life course there.

In this regard, the following topic was brought to the discussion: “*How would you help to improve life in the village?*”

The responses were translated through subject activities and evaluations, and our understanding is that this is also a way to change the rural reality.

“I plan to do my job well, that’s the way I think” (male).

“In my village, most people are poor and they don’t live well, but I’ll go back there because my parents need me” (female).

“I will try to help my relatives as much as I can, in the village people always need assistance and support” (female).

“I can’t help with money at this stage, but I will work on the land, with the animals, and that’s how I’ll help” (male).

Taking this cue, the following question was also asked: “Are there young people in your village?”

The responses were almost entirely affirmative. According to our respondents, most young people remain in the village. Some go to the nearby city, but if the parents are in the village the children generally stay there. Tradition in Muslim communities is strong, as is awareness of the duty of care towards the elderly.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the focus groups.

First and foremost, the respondents positively assessed vocational training as an opportunity to acquire practical skills, to start work and to form transferable skills. Their evaluations show that the pragmatic orientation of education is important for young people, perceived from an instrumental perspective, and is obviously a continuation of the values in the family, but also of an overall life orientation. On the other hand, the focus of young people in the rural environment requires special attention. They perceive themselves as having grown up in the village, with full knowledge of the conditions and circumstances of rural life. Their decision to return to the village, work there, be part of their family and relatives is a natural and logical path and behaviour.

Here, special attention should be paid to the view that general well-being involves individual activities and subjective experiences. The village community and contributions thereto occur through the local and particularly the ethnic kin community. Thus, when a person is useful to him/herself and his/her relatives, this will benefit others; although this approach bears the marks of a kind of family centrism, it manifests itself especially in communities that are more traditionalist and related to the genus. From this point of view, the importance of family well-being brings with it the well-being and sustainability of the rural community.

DISCUSSION

An important issue related to the revival of village life is the structure of values and the influence of the family. In Bulgarian society, the values of the three main ethnic communities, namely the Bulgarians, Turks and Roma, differ. While individualism, pragmatism and competition, considered in the discourse of neoliberalism, are at the fore among Bulgarians (Mitev *et al.* 2014); for the remaining two ethnic communities – the Turks and Roma – the power of tradition and the influence of parents are leading values.

Statistics can also be considered in this context. According to the last census of 2021, 4,782,064 people, or 73.3%, live in cities, and 1,737,725, or 26.7%, live in villages (NSI). In addition, a total of 566 villages in the country are without a population or with a single-digit number of inhabitants, according to the National Register of Settlements of the NSI. The most frequently practiced behaviour of young people from the Bulgarian ethnic group living in the countryside is migration to the cities or outside the country. Conversely, in various regions of the country, there are villages entirely inhabited by a compact Turkish or Muslim

population. In these villages, the population is of all age categories and migrations are considerably smaller. When migrations do occur, they are seasonal or for some foreseeable period of time.

The depopulation of the villages, the limited opportunities for well-being and the lack of infrastructure constitute a closed circle. In this context, the values of the different ethnic communities may provide some explanation for the situation and the way in which the local community and family are perceived as a force of attraction for the younger generations.

CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this paper clearly illustrate how vocational and dual training are effective means of providing opportunities for rural youth entry in the labour market, and for some of them, the return to their village. The rationale behind this paper was anchored on exploring the possibilities and limitations associated with vocational schools as an institutional environment for the preparation of young people from rural areas to be competitive in the labour market. The picture formed on the basis of the results presented the evaluations of the three investigated communities – business, local government and educational institutions – regarding the quality of VET and its relevance to the labour market, as well as the graduates' job transition, especially those from rural areas. The value of such knowledge is that it highlights the terms by which vocational education is regarded from the point of view of the quality of vocational training, to suggest ideas for problematizing one or other aspects of the correspondence between VET and the requirements of the labour market and to serve as a basis for creating sustainability in the village lifestyle (Dahama 1979).

The three studied communities – business, local government, educational institutions – claimed that the quality of training in the field of vocational education currently corresponds partially to the needs of the labour market. Educational institutions and businesses, as more directly experiencing the effects of the partial correspondence between the quality of professional training and the needs of the labour market, have also taken specific practical actions in this direction, related to the establishment of lasting contacts with each other and the inclusion of business organisations and companies from the real economy in various forms in the educational process. The local authority also has a positive attitude towards the dual form of education and has displayed proactive behaviour towards the implementation of this positive attitude.

Bringing education closer to the labour market and dual training involves practical training in a real work environment and training in a vocational school or a vocational high school. The inclusion of rural NEETs in the labour market is seen as a key prerequisite for the successful reduction of the share of people living at

risk of poverty, material deprivation or being heavily reliant on social welfare systems.

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Acest articol se concentrează pe educația vocațională, cu rolul ei de catalizator pentru intrarea tinerilor din mediul rural pe piața muncii. Analiza prezintă o evaluare a stării pregătirii profesionale din punctul de vedere al calității pregătirii practice a absolvenților și al potrivirii acesteia cu cerințele de pe piața muncii. Studiul prezintă perspectiva a trei tipuri de entități sociale relevante pentru intrarea pe piața muncii – școlile vocaționale, firmele private și administrația locală. Scopul articolului este acela de a scoate în evidență trăsăturile specifice ale evaluărilor și opiniilor diferiților actori sub forma unui plan bine încheiat și de a prezenta posibilitățile pe care educația profesională le generează, ca aceea de a crea o legătură între ofertă și cererea de abilități profesionale. Este nevoie de o tranziție fluentă de la educație la angajare a tinerilor din regiunile rurale pentru a diminua procentajul de NEET din așezările rurale și spre a crea un mediu rural mai bine dezvoltat.

Cuvinte-cheie: educație vocațională și pregătire educațională (VET); tranziția dintre școală și muncă; condițiile din Bulgaria; cursul vieții; ruralitate.

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