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CHALLENGES TO ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY OF A NEW STUDY PROGRAMME IN A COMPETITIVE CONTEXT³

Assoc. Prof. Liliya Todorova,

Department of Public Health and Social Work,

“Angel Kanchev” University of Ruse

Tel.: +359 886781013

E-mail: litod@uni-ruse.bg

***Abstract:** The University of Ruse is a pioneer in introducing Occupational Therapy as a new educational degree and profession in Bulgaria. For already 13 years, the academic staff has invested their time and efforts to build a programme that meets national requirements and is internationally approved. Now the profession has reached a stage when it is becoming recognised and there is a growing need for trained practitioners. The next challenge is to ensure sustainability of the education in a highly competitive context and demographic problems. The report focuses on factors that bring about vulnerability and strategies to ensure sustainability. It is based on the author's reflections while building the first Occupational Therapy programme in Bulgaria.*

***Keywords:** occupational therapy, sustainability, higher education*

***JEL Codes:** I140, I240*

INTRODUCTION

Modern world is marked by rapid development of science and technologies leading to constant changes in the job market. As a result, higher education faces the challenge to prepare students for a labour market that is not known and even for jobs that do not exist. There is a growing gap between the preparation provided by institutions of higher education and the rapidly changing job market. The question is whether traditional higher education is prepared to meet technological developments and societal needs.

The University of Ruse is a pioneer in introducing Occupational Therapy (OT) as a new educational degree and profession in Bulgaria. For already 13 years, the academic staff has been investing time and efforts to build a programme that meets national requirements and is internationally approved. Now the profession has reached a stage when it is becoming recognised and there is a growing need for trained practitioners. However, nevertheless that Occupational Therapy is well known as a profession and ranks amongst the best jobs worldwide, its existence in the country is threatened. National regulations on higher education place numerous requirements that jeopardize introducing new programmes in the country. The challenge today is to ensure sustainability of the education in a highly competitive context and demographic problems.

The paper shares the author's experiences and reflections during the process of establishment of Occupational Therapy in Bulgaria. It focuses on the factors that bring about vulnerability and the strategies to ensure sustainability.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF RUSE

Occupational therapy is an autonomous health care profession. Occupational therapy services are provided only by qualified occupational therapists in educational programmes that meet WFOT's Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists (2016). These programmes are approved by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) and receive a worldwide recognized certificate.

At the beginning of the new millennium Bulgaria was one of the few countries in Europe and worldwide, where Occupational Therapy did not exist. In 2003, the University of Ruse became a

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partner in the project Facilitation and Participation of Young Persons with Disabilities in an Enlarged Europe (FPYPDEE), coordinated by the European Network of Occupational Therapy in Higher education (ENOTHE). The aim of the project was to train the trainers and prepare the start of educational programmes in OT in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. The outcome of the project was the start of the first bachelor programme in Bulgaria at the University of Ruse in 2006. In 2013 a master programme in Community-based Occupational Therapy was launched with the aim to ensure continuousness of the teaching staff.

ACHIEVEMENTS

In the period 2006 – 2019, 132 bachelor and 35 master students were graduated in the OT programme. In 2009 and 2015 the programme was accredited by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency. In October 2019 the papers for the 3rd national accreditation were submitted. In 2014 the Bachelor programme was approved by the WFOT.

On the 2nd of October 2010 – the graduation day of the first cohort of qualified occupational therapists, the professional organization Association of Bulgarian Ergotherapists (ABET) was founded. In 2013 the association started a small OT service for children, which is now one of the main practical placements for the students.

The OT programme at the University of Ruse is well known and recognized in Europe and worldwide. The university has 28 Erasmus partners from 8 countries and has hosted 72 incoming students from the UK, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. They count to more than half of the total number of Bulgarian graduates. A quarter of the Bulgarian students (33) have spent a period abroad for traineeship. Incoming and outgoing teaching mobilities are almost equal – 36 to 37.

The curriculum was developed in line with the national requirements and the WFOT's Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists. The qualification of the academic staff complies with the national standards and the number is sufficient for the student population. It consists of two full time associate professors and two part time assistant professors from the first master graduates. The full time teachers were trained in the FPYPDEE project with the aim to introduce Occupational Therapy in Bulgaria. Though modest in number, the teaching staff is highly qualified, motivated and hard working. They took the responsibility for the design of the curriculum, the educational process and teaching resources – 8 Bulgarian books in Occupational Therapy were written and published.

Internationalisation has significant part in the education. Staff and students have participated in 8 international projects and 6 international modules.

A representative of the academic staff was a member of the ENOTHE board (2004 – 2010), and another one – of the Executive Committee of the Council of Occupational Therapists for the European Countries, COTEC (2015 – 2018).

The University hosted two large international events – the 21st Annual Meeting of ENOTHE in 2015 and the 2nd International conference on OT for Bulgaria and Romania “From Roots to Fruits in the Balkan Countries in 2019, organized in collaboration with the University of Bacau, Romania.

SUCCESS FACTORS

The programme was thoughtfully and strategically prepared. On a national level we established contacts with the ministries of education, health and labour and social policy, as well as with organisations of disabled people, parents and service providers. OT was included in the National Classifier of the Professions in 2005 and the following editions. At the level of the university, the curriculum was developed to fit the WFOT standards and ENOTHE guidelines, but also the local context, the profile of the university and the available teaching staff.

International collaboration was crucial, especially at the beginning, when we had no internal resources. ENOTHE has been a source of inspiration, collaboration, support and guidance from the very beginning until now. In ENOTHE we learned about student-centred and competence-based education, curriculum development, new methods of teaching and assessment etc. (Mincheva, Ivanova, 2016; Todorova et al, 2017). The students had the chance to attend ENOTHE meetings and feel the inspiration of the international OT community. In ENOTHE we found our Erasmus partners,

learned to think strategically and be proactive. The network still has substantial role in keeping our knowledge up-to date.

The University was a partner in 8 international projects, three of them still active:

- Facilitation and Participation of Young Persons with Disabilities in an Enlarged Europe (FPYPDEE) 2003 – 2007
- TUNING Educational Structures in Europe
- European Archipelago of Humanistic Thematic Networks
- Tuning Sectoral Framework for Social Sciences
- COPORE (Competences for Poverty Reduction) (2009)
- i-CARE (2017 – 2020)
- COPILOT (2018 – 2021)
- EUPRAC (Europractice for Occupational Therapists) – 2018 – 2021

Participation in international modules is not only a way of learning, but also a source of inspiration for the students. In order to ensure opportunity for Bulgarian students to participate in international modules and events, whenever possible we host them. Unfortunately, with the small student population it is becoming more and more difficult to find motivated students with sufficient English.

The students and staff have participated in 6 international modules, some of them repeatedly:

- European Policies for people with disabilities and elderly, 2006, 2008, 2009
- Student Workshop on Community Development in Health Care, Amsterdam, 2013
- IC4Life – Hasselt, 2014, Ruse, 2016, 2019
- EEE4all – Heerlen, 2014, 2015, 2018
- ICC@Home – distant, 2016 – 2019
- CBMH – Bacau, 2017, 2018, 2019

Nowadays Occupational Therapy is already well known as a profession in Bulgaria and the education at the University of Ruse is recognized as the only appropriate in Bulgaria.

CHALLENGES

Sustainability is a key issue all over the world. The Sustainable Development Goals, launched by the UN (2015), are a call for action and a commitment to eradicate poverty and promote prosperity while protecting the planet. In 2018 WFOT launched the publication “Sustainability Matters” with the intention to promote the idea of sustainability as relevant to human occupation, making it part of the occupational therapy scope of practice and scholarship. The call for a focus on sustainability is really about human empowerment so that human beings are agents who affect their own health through reflective occupational participation to support a healthy environment in which they exist (WFOT, 2018).

Obtaining a quality education is the foundation to creating sustainable development. Education is one of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and a fundamental right. Investing in a quality education for all is essential to realize the other SDGs and targets. It is also the most powerful tool for sustainable development.

After 15 years of dedication to the establishment of OT education and profession in Bulgaria, investing a lot of energy and time, our **priority now is to ensure sustainability. What challenges do we face?**

A number of studies rank Bulgaria among the fastest shrinking nations in the European Union. The country's population registered its peak in the mid-1980s, when it was about to reach figure of 9 million, while nowadays it is hardly 7 million. The reasons are well-known – decreased birth rate, aging and migration, especially of young and knowledgeable people. The demographic challenges affect higher education – the number of higher education graduates is constantly decreasing (fig. 1). The graph in fig. 2 shows the number of applicants competing for one place in the OT programme since its start.

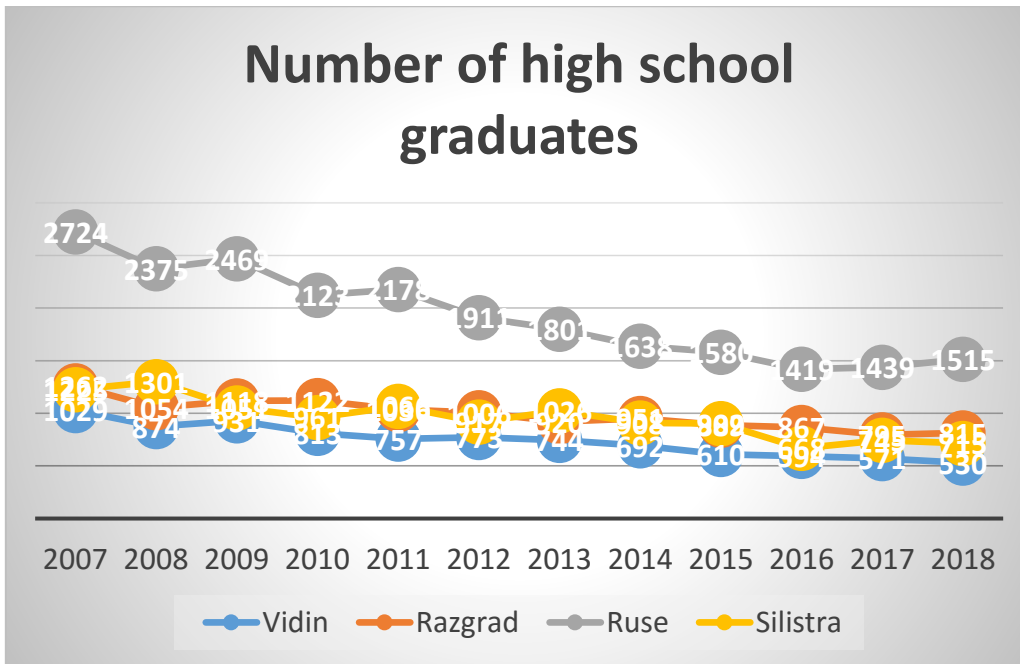


Figure 1. Number of high school graduates from 2007 to 2018 in the Danube region

Recently, the places at the universities exceed the number of applicants. We are in a situation of universities competing for students, not students for universities. This causes tension between the universities and within the university and leads to unloyal competition.

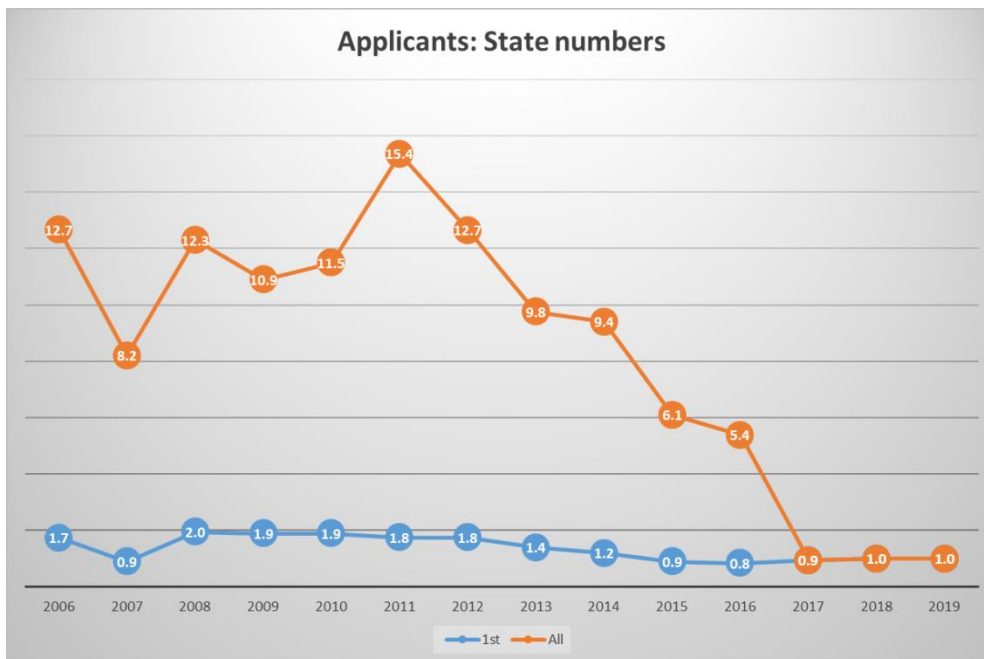


Figure 2. Number of applicants competing for one place in the OT programme

The Council of Ministers in Bulgaria approved a list of protected specialties – those with the highest expected shortage in the labour market and with greatest growth in added value, which are also expected to have the highest growth in wages. These programmes receive a number of state benefits: increased number of students to be admitted, additional scholarships and higher funding (Eurydice).

On the contrary, the number of students in the social sector is gradually decreasing. Given the fact that they are highly needed in society, but not attractive due to low salaries and high level of stress, the government should stimulate them instead of creating restrictions.

In 2019 the University of Ruse submitted to the Ministry of Education justified rationale for including Occupational Therapy in the list of protected specialties. They are defined as programmes running only in one university, not very attractive for students, but needed by the society. The rationale was supported with letters from the WFOT, ENOTHE, COTEC and many national organisations, but it was not accepted. Each year the numbers of students subsidized by the state are decreasing, so that the annual intake is already below the critical minimum of 15 students.

The accreditation process is also affected by the competition between the universities, so it is no longer constructive and enough flexible to allow development of new programmes.

The number of academic staff depends on the number of students trained. With a small number of students in OT workload can be provided for 3 to 4 teachers. On the other hand, it is recommended that one lecturer teach no more than 4 courses. The accreditation process takes into account a large number of quantitative indicators, especially with regard to the academic staff, with no positive effect on the quality of training. The requirement for a permanent position at the universities is a PhD. The academic career is not very attractive for young people, because it is highly demanding and low paid.

The academic staff is also responsible for the implementation of the profession. The OT graduates usually have to create non existing OT positions without any role model. They have to protect their own professional identity and meet the high expectations of the other professionals. Very often, they are forced to fulfill obligations of other professionals. In combination with the emotional exhaustion and low salary, it is not strange that most of them leave the profession.

At the same time a huge need of qualified OT is expressed, especially by parents of disabled children. New positions for OTs are open, for which PTs, special teachers can also apply. OT is a holistic profession combining elements of other profession. As a result many specialists pretend to be OTs without having proper education, which causes enormous confusion in the labour market.

Most of the graduates of the University of Ruse are from the North East of Bulgaria. The majority of them stay in the area, because they cannot afford to live on their own away from their families.

At present the OT practice is developed mainly in the pediatric area. It needs to be expanded to other areas like physical impairments, mental health, inclusive education, inclusive employment etc. However, with a limited number of qualified OTs, it is hard to promote OT in new areas.

THE WAY FORWARD – CHANGE

OT in Bulgaria was developed with the need to meet the need of social and educational reforms. The new OT agenda puts an emphasis on social reform, which is related to social change and social transformation. At this moment being involved only with teaching is not enough. Social reform is closely linked to poverty eradication and sustainable development. Developing OT education for social reform is not just implementing a good curriculum, training lecturers or allocating skills, but it needs organizational engagement, system thinking and willingness to change (van Bruggen in Kronenberg et al, 2011)

We live in a context that is changing constantly. It requires us as educators to change, but also to bring about change. So the only way forward is CHANGE! First of all, we have to change the attitude to the education, so that is recognized and appreciated in the country as much as it is respected abroad. Secondly, we have to change the attitude towards the profession, so that it is properly understood and valued and nobody claims to be an OT without proper education. OTs should be recognized as indispensable and respected members of the rehabilitation team. And most of all we need to change the attitude of society towards persons with disabilities so that they are viewed as people who can contribute and not a burden. In my opinion, OT will become strong and sustainable as education and as a profession in Bulgaria when it contributes to change.

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