

## REVIEW

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on the academic output for application for the academic position of professor, professional field 1.1. 44/19.05.2023 for the needs of the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures - NBU, with sole applicant Assoc. Prof. Elena Atanasova Blagoeva, PhD

### I. Assessment of compliance with the minimum national requirements and the requirements of New Bulgarian University

1. The submitted documents by the applicant show that Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Blagoeva exceeds the minimum national academic and teaching requirements as defined by Art. 2b of the Higher Education Act, Art. 1a, para. 1 of the NBU Regulation on the Development of Academic Staff and Annex 2 (NBU Minimum National Requirements and NBU requirements).

### 2. Information about the applicant

The only applicant in the competition is Assoc. Prof. Elena Blagoeva, PhD. In the period 2003-2006 she was a doctoral student at NBU with academic supervisor Prof. N. Yordanov. Her dissertation entitled: "EU Cultural Policy and Cultural Aspects in Common Policies" was defended in 2007. (The diploma was awarded in 2009). She holds a Master's degree in European Integration from NBU (2000) and a Master's degree in Directing from NATFA (1990), as well as numerous international specializations in educational and cultural management, including an international postgraduate diploma in project management in education, fundraising and PR skills - University of Austin USA and Open Society Institute, Budapest; "Academic Administration - Structure, Vision, Finance and Marketing, IT, International Projects" - University of Surrey, UK; specialization in European Integration.

Her professional development began in 1993-1995 as the Executive Director of the Concepts-Bulgaria Foundation, which deals with cultural and educational initiatives and projects. In 1995 she started working at NBU as the Director of the Graduate School. In 1997- 2012 she held the position of Director of the International Department. In 2000-2002 she was Director of the University Administration, in parallel continuing to lead the International Department. She started teaching as a lecturer at New Bulgarian University in 2009. In 2012 she was appointed Assistant Professor and in 2013, she was appointed Senior Assistant Professor. In 2020, she was elected Associate Professor at New Bulgarian University and at present teaches at the BS "Administration and Management", BS "Marketing", MS "Art Management", MS "Project Management of EU Funds and Programmes" and MS "Public Management". Since 2021, she has also been teaching at the BA Primary School Pedagogy and Foreign Language and MA Leadership and Management in Education.

In the period 1997-2012 she acted as NBU's representative in national and European institutions dealing with reforms and strategies for the development of education - EAIE, EACEA, Ministry of Education, Council of Coordinators of ERASMUS, etc.

Elena Blagoeva is also actively involved outside the NBU in the field of education and culture. She is the author and manager of more than 30 projects related to culture and education, funded by EU programmes, Ministry of Education and Science, EEA Fund, Ministry of Youth and Sports, foundations. In the period 2009-2013 she was an expert at the European Commission for the evaluation and selection of international projects for multinational cooperation between Member States and third countries in higher education. She has worked as an expert for the Ministry of Regional Development and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs on projects for social inclusion and vocational education. She is a member of the Board of the LACTEA Centre (Local Administrators' Continuing Training in European Affairs) and of the Board of the Concepts-Bulgaria Foundation. She is also a member of the Bulgarian Association for European Integration.

She has participated with papers and as a moderator in a number of international academic fora - International Round Table "Second Chance Education" 2022; STEMEDU-Scientific Conference with International Participation, Veliko Tarnovo 2021, International Conference on Computer Systems and Technologies '20: Educational Aspects of Computer Systems and Technologies, Ruse 2020; UEA Seminar - "COVID-19: Emerging lessons in crisis response and management" 2020; EAIE Workshop - "Engaging academic staff in internationalisation" 2020; Marie Curie Alumni Association Annual Conference - presentation on opportunities for incorporating art methods in education in Horizon2020 project development ("Cyber-physical systems for rehabilitation in education") 2019, among others.

## II. Research and results

1. Evaluation of the monographic work, creative performances or other publications, corresponding in volume and completeness to a monographic work, including an evaluation of the scientific and applied contributions of the author.

In the present competition Assoc. Prof. Dr. Blagoeva has submitted academic research based on 15 publications. One major monograph ("Education and the Digital Transition in Europe - Policies and Attitudes"), a book published on the basis of a defended dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Science ("The European Dimension in Education and Culture - Policies and Governance"), two chapters in collective monographs in English, two studies and nine articles in academic journals and collections, five of them published in journals indexed in world databases (Web of Science and SCOPUS). I believe that the scientific output presented is sufficient for participation in the competition and corresponds to the professional field and scientific specialty.

The main monograph submitted is "Education and the Digital Transition in Europe - Policies and Attitudes". Until now, there has been no similar study that comprehensively deals with developments in education policies at European and national level in the light of digital change and the series of crises in recent years. The book combines an overview and analysis of the overall context of the educational environment and policies with a gradual focus on higher education and the changes imposed and necessitated by the digital transition. This is also one of the author's most significant contributions, as she has not limited herself to particular aspects of the topic, but has spread her analysis over a wide range of topics, both from a European and national perspective, and across all educational stages. Thus, an overall picture of processes and measures is constructed, by which the relevance and continuity of policies (including in Bulgaria) from one educational level to another can be traced up to higher education. Despite the broad scope, the structure is clear and logical. The work contains many empirical facts, data and information, without which this kind of research is impossible. The information is not used for its own sake, but is logically woven into the course of the exposition. The vast empirical material is well refined and moderately dosed, with a good balance between the overall theoretical framework of the issues at hand and the rich illustrative and empirical material presented to support the analysis. This is a serious achievement of the study, which speaks for excellent

theoretical skills in handling a plethora of numerical and theoretical information without overwhelming the analysis and exposition of the material. The bibliographical references are 151, of which 124 are in English and include books, articles, official documents of European and Bulgarian institutions.

I would also like to mention the appropriate academic style, the elegant and understandable language of the book, the emotional colouring at times. This makes the text readable, despite the large amount of information and the multitude of normative and other documents.

Chapters One and Two examine and analyse recent documents of the EU institutions in the field of education that have served as a framework for the development of strategies and plans at national level. One is devoted to the European Education Area and the other to the European Higher Education Area. It analyses the effect of previous actions and the impact of the pandemic crisis on educational institutions. Chapter Three links the previous two with the author's study of student attitudes in Chapter Four. It presents the trends for the introduction of digitalization in education, analysing the positive and negative consequences, the preparedness of teachers and learners, the quality of infrastructure and equipment, and the adequacy of the measures and forms that the state or individual institutions apply to respond to the needs and expectations of new generations of students. The three chapters pay particular attention to higher education in the light of increased demands for competitiveness and relevance to both its social role and the labour market. To this should be added the author's critical analysis of the documents in each chapter, sparing no unpleasant facts, omissions or weaknesses. The author's position is strongly expressed on most of the issues discussed.

The three chapters also clarify the context in which the results of the authors' national survey are analysed and evaluated in Chapter Four. It was carried out among 1004 students from 45 universities and explored their attitudes towards online learning. The survey is a representative sample and all statistical checks for reliability and validity have been made. The survey methodology is precise and combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The research design adapts Rosenberg's Attitudinal Model, and the analysis additionally employs elements of the interpretive approach - observation and focus groups. The instrument used to collect empirical data on student attitudes contained 32 questions (5 demographic, 1 NPS on general attitudes towards online learning and 26 related to student attitudes towards different aspects of online learning). The analysis is factorial, so the questions are grouped into five factors: Support, Convenience, Difficulty, Communication, and Technology. The results are presented according to 14 criteria, accompanied by tables and graphs for clarity. The in-depth and detailed analysis, which is not simply linear across the factors but looks for correlations between groups, factors and individual questions, is highly impressive. Conclusions and recommendations are supported by the results data presented.

The 26 suggestions and recommendations made are a worthy conclusion of this theoretical study with a distinctive practical-applied character for the Bulgarian educational scene. Many of them are original and innovative for university practice. The results of the national survey of student attitudes in Chapter Four form concrete recommendations directly in favour of universities for specific decisions on the forms of education, the ratios between them, the necessary feedback data, etc. Based on the analysis and conclusions, recommendations are made at the end of the book in several directions - to decision-makers at the national level, to the management of educational institutions and (last but not least) to the target group of teachers.

I believe that the present work represents a major study in the field of educational management, examined from different perspectives. This is the first attempt to present in a comprehensive and critical way the whole range of normative documents (regulations, laws, ordinances, etc.), as well as resolutions, guidelines and recommendations, which present in a panoramic way the direction in which education is developing in Europe and Bulgaria, as well as the societal requirements for it in the light

of one of the most significant transitions - the digital one. The complexity of the study is compounded by considering the impact of the pandemic crisis and combining documentary analysis and findings with immediate feedback. The author has done a successful job and I am convinced that the research will spark interest not only among educational circles (especially academia), experts, professionals and policy makers, but also among students and teachers. The book can be used as a reference in updating national measures, in analyzing institutional policies, and for working with students from different professional fields - educational management, informatics, pedagogy, public administration.

## 2. Evaluation of the contributions in the other submitted research published after the acquisition of the academic position of Associate Professor

The book "The European Dimension in Education and Culture - Policies and Governance" provides a systematic analysis of the policies, strategies and instruments in the field of EU education and culture policy valid until 2020. What is striking is the skilful structure of the analysis - policies (with weaknesses and strengths) are examined in relation to each other, leading to strategies; how well the strategies reflect the policy and how the adequacy/inadequacy of the strategy affects the quality of the instruments and hence the management and administration processes. A comparative analysis is made of the many revisions of certain strategies and the unrealised objectives are actually highlighted, although this is not mentioned in official documents. The persistence of the EU in certain areas is highlighted, which the author derives as inevitable directions/trends that the EU will apply all its influence to realise, despite the resistance of Member States or national institutions. This makes the conclusions about successes, failures or shortcomings clear and reasonable. The book was written prior to the competition for "Associate Professor", but was not included in the academic metrics for NACID (National Center for Information and Documentation), which makes it possible to submit in the current procedure.

The two chapters in the international collective monograph Strengthening Second Chance Networks in Europe explore the problem of school dropout in European countries and best practices in Europe. Bulgaria's lagging behind in this area makes the research useful for decision makers in Bulgaria as well as for teachers and mediators in Bulgarian schools. The topic of inclusive education and its connection with new technologies is also addressed in "Robotic Technology for Inclusive Education: A Cyber-Physical System Approach to Pedagogical Rehabilitation" and "Cognitive Aspects of Cyber-Physical Systems for Pedagogical Rehabilitation: towards a STEM Approach in Inclusive Education".

Several articles deal with specific aspects of the development of education and science - "Modernisation of Higher Education - Willful Action or Wishful Thinking? The Case of Bulgaria", "Opportunities and Challenges for Financing Quality Science in the EU. The role of the European Research Council and the participation of Bulgaria"; "New challenges and new measures for quality education in Europe - where is Bulgaria"; "Education - A powerful factor for the integration of migrants in Europe". The specific situations, the opportunities that the EU provides and the extent/success/gaps to which Bulgaria has been able to take advantage to develop science and education, as well as to take adequate measures for the integration of migrants related to their education and preparation for adequate participation in the labour market, instead of forming attitudes of threat and unnecessary, are thoroughly analysed.

Several articles discuss intercultural skills and competences as an important factor for changing perceived stereotypes, increasing competitiveness and developing internationalization in universities - "Assessing Intercultural Competence - a Tool for Increasing Competitiveness and Self-Knowledge", "Strategic Challenges for Internationalization in Higher Education in the Context of Crisis" and Habermas' Analysis of "Communicative Action" in Cultural Policy Making.

Last but not least is the topic of education during the crises of recent years, which Dr. Blagoeva explores in detail. This is evidenced by the studies "How do we manage the unknown - new lessons for universities?", "What after Covid in the educational process?" and "Leap into the digital - For or Against or To What Extent? A national survey of student attitudes".

In conclusion, it can be said that Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Blagoeva has demonstrated consistent interests in her field of specialization, has impressive publications in reputable journals, and a rich biography as a teacher and expert. I give a positive evaluation for her academic and applied contributions related to educational management with emphasis on HE, national and European policies in the field of education, management of educational projects.

### 3. Quotes by other authors

Dr. Blagoeva's works have been cited 10 times in publications refereed and indexed in databases (SCOPUS, Web of Science); 14 citations in monographs or collective volumes with scientific peer review; 1 citation in a non-refereed peer reviewed journal.

### 4. Evaluation of the results of participation in research projects and application of the obtained results in practice

In terms of leadership and participation in projects, Assoc. Prof. Blagoeva demonstrates impressive experience - 295 points out of the 100 required. For the period 2018/19-2022 alone, she led 4 international research/educational projects and 2 national ones. As an academic and an expert, she participated in 1 international and 3 national projects. The international projects are funded by the European Commission, the EU Research Executive Agency and the EEA Financial Mechanism. The results of the projects, both in terms of management and final achievements, have been positively evaluated, indicating excellent professionalism and expertise.

## II. Lecturing

Assoc. Prof. Blagoeva is the head of a working group for the development of professional field 1.1. and MA "Leadership and Management in Education" and 1.2. "Pedagogy. She has developed or participated in the development of 5 curricula - International Joint Master's Programmes "Business Communications", "International Communications" and "Tourism Management", MA "Leadership and Management in Education" and BA "Primary School Pedagogy and Foreign Language". In 2020 Assoc. Prof. Blagoeva developed a module for specialization "Teacher".

Over the years, she has developed 25 classroom and 11 extra-curricular courses, including Educational Policies in the EU-Comparative Analysis; Software of the Mind-Intercultural Aspects in Education, Project Thinking and Educational Project Management, Ethics, EU Policies in Education and Culture, etc. All her courses are also developed in the e-learning module "MOODLE - NBU"; she has worked with overseas and Erasmus students. The average grade by students for the last 10 semesters (5 years) is 4.65 (max. 5.00).

## IV. Administrative and public activities

Assoc. Prof. Blagoeva has been actively involved in administration as Head of the Pedagogy Section of the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures (since 2022), Director of the Pedagogy Program Council (2020-22), Director of the Program Council - Department of Public Administration (2015-16), Program Director (2012-13), Member of the Academic Council (2000-2006), Member of the Rector's Council (2000-2002). She has participated in the NBU Strategic Development Committee, the Erasmus Programme Committee, the Committee for Recognition of Degrees, Study Periods and Professional Qualifications Acquired Abroad, etc.

#### V. Personal impressions of the candidate (if any)

#### VI. Recommendations and comments on the applicant's activities and achievements

The academic publications show consistency and systematicity in the areas of Assoc. Prof. Blagoeva's research interests. Her academic contributions stand out in the analysis of the policies and trends in the management of education in Bulgaria and Europe, as well as in the current and timely monitoring of trends and changes at international level in specific aspects of education and the analysis of their projection and impact on education in Bulgaria. I give a high evaluation of Elena Blagoeva's academic and creative contribution as well as her teaching and administrative work. She works actively and creatively at the University with undeniable potential that is worth exploiting.

#### Conclusion

On the basis of the above achievements of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Blagoeva, I would like to express my positive evaluation of her overall academic and research activities and recommend to the esteemed Academic Council that she be elected "Professor", in professional field 1.1. "Theory and Management of Education" (Management of Higher Education).

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