

# LET'S TALK ABOUT EUROPE! EU TOPICS IN CONTINUOUS TEACHER EDUCATION

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*„...To make Europe a better place to live means to think about what we can change in our countries, places where we live or where we travel - the Europe which we will leave it the future for our children...“*

*„...Other important thing for me is learning to be more tolerant in view of current circumstances of enmities of different character- ethnicity, religion or freedom of expression...“*

*„...Europe is all about young people, because they are the future of the Union. It's important that they feel the Union as a part of their nationality, to be interested in its structure, meaning, ideas and legislation. If young people are involved, the future will be brighter...“*

*Second-year EU Studies students*

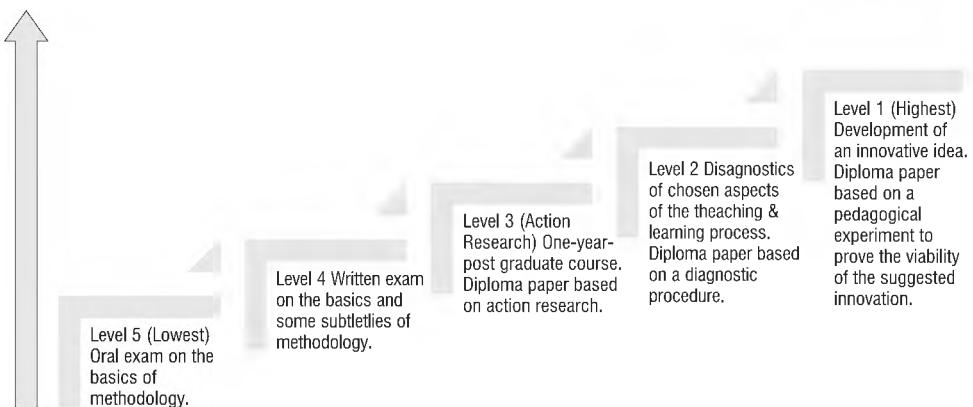
## **By way of introduction**

Being a member of the academic staff of the EU Studies Department at Sofia University (Faculty of Philosophy) the author of this paper has the privilege to work with highly motivated, hard-working, open-minded students whose curiosity makes them look incessantly for the answers to a number of important questions regarding the past, the present and the future of the European Union and of our country as part of it. It is undoubted that their untiring inquisitive approach, probing questions, unexpected suggestions and opinions are related not only to the inspiring learning environment they are faced with at the university but also have their roots back in their school life when they were taught, motivated and driven forward by equally inspiring teachers of different subjects. It is exactly this relationship between secondary and tertiary education with an emphasis on developing its „European“ strand that is going to be in the focus of our attention.

## Background

### *The system for upgrading in-service teacher qualification in Bulgaria*

Since 1996 Ordinance Nr 5 of the Ministry of Education and Science<sup>1</sup> has regulated the award of the so-called professional qualification levels (PQL) for teachers working in the system of secondary education, which are five in total, starting from Level 5 (the lowest) and finishing with Level 1 (the highest). Until 2015 draft amendments to the Ordinance a teacher could apply for acquiring Level 5 after four years of uninterrupted teaching experience and in the best cases one could acquire Level 1 within 8 years given this person had moved from level to level without „taking a break“. It is now planned to make it possible to apply for acquiring the lowest level exam after two years of teaching experience.



***Fig. 1. The national system of upgrading teachers' qualification at a glance.***

As evident in the above figure, this path through the upgrading system spirals from a relatively unchallenging point of demonstrating relevant pedagogic skills to a level involving serious research not only into one's own teaching practice but in the theoretical issues surrounding the particular research question chosen by a candidate. A threshold stage of Bulgarian teachers' professional development is thus the „middle“ level - the Third level of professional qualification. While at the Fifth and the Fourth level exams teachers are expected to demonstrate how

<sup>1</sup> First published in the *State Gazette*, issue 6/1997, this Ordinance has been amended and added to several times over the years without changing its essence. The most recent changes planned this year also do not affect substantially the way PQLs are awarded. The draft document can be accessed at <http://www.mon.bg/?go=page&pageId=381&subpageId=63>.

conversant they are with the basic methodologies typical of the subject they teach through discussing a theoretical question and developing an accompanying lesson plan, the Third PQL is awarded after a whole year of post-graduate studies, doing action research, and writing up and defending a diploma paper on the action research done.

In general, action research is seen as „a practical approach to professional inquiry in any social situation“ and is not restricted to educational contexts only<sup>2</sup> but is considered suitable to use in cases when encouragement of a reflective approach to own practice and self-development is sought. The idea of applying action research in education is not new but it continues attracting researchers' attention. There is growing evidence that teaching quality and teachers' ability to reflect on their instructional practice critically affects students' learning outcomes<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Teacher education in a European perspective***

According to a working group of Member State experts<sup>4</sup> there are three broad areas of teacher competences, namely, a) working with others, b) working with knowledge, technology and information and c) working in and with society. As Caena (2011: 4)<sup>5</sup> points out in her work „the first underlines the values of inclusion embedded in professional values, aimed at developing each student's potential, together with interpersonal and cooperative skills, as well as psychological-pedagogical knowledge. The second implies the abilities of retrieving, managing and critically analysing several kinds of information, involving digital skills applied to professional purposes, together with pedagogical and teaching skills. The third requires teachers to act as responsible professionals in local educational communities and with different actors, and to promote the development of students as European citizens with global responsibilities, encouraging dispositions and attitudes to cooperation and mobility, intercultural dialogue and respect.“

It is clear that the preparation towards acquiring the Third PQL is especially fruitful in the achievement of the above-outlined areas of teachers' professional development as it is the turning point at which a teacher is supposed to adopt a markedly reflective approach to one's own practice. Thus a pedagogue is prompted to explore what he or she does in relation to a particular teaching and learning aspect (i.e. emphasising on the intercultural aspect of communicating in a foreign language or incorporating EU-related topics in the subject-matter), and how the process of treating it in and out of class can be improved. It is the Third PQL that lays the foundation of future research and grass-roots pedagogic innovation.

<sup>2</sup> See: Waters-Adams, S. (2006) on the essence of action research in education - <http://www.edu.plymouth.ac.uk/resined/actionresearch/arhome.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing twenty-first century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 300-314.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission DG Education and Culture (2005) Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications.

<sup>5</sup> Caena, F. (2011). Literature review. Teachers' Core Competences: Requirements and Development. European Commission DG Education and Culture

## ***The European Dimensions of Secondary Education post-graduate course for teachers***

Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“ - Faculty of Philosophy partnering in a EU-funded project (*Aplanet* - a KA2 project (2010-2012) and the EU Studies Department initiating and implementing *Learning By Doing Europe* (a Jean Monet project (2012) allowed carrying out theoretical research and putting into practice innovative teacher education models. Furthermore, the Jean Monnet Chair of Identity and Multilingualism in Europe of Assoc. Prof. Maria Stoicheva (since 2013) has made it possible to look for opportunities to enhance the EU strand in teacher training at the university.

As a result, there came the idea to further enhance the sustainability of these projects through starting a joint post-graduate one-year course for teachers leading to the Third PQL (in partnership with the Department of Information and In-service Teacher Training at Sofia University). It has to be noted that although addressed at a wider audience, the first two „rounds“ of the course (in 2013-2014 and in 2014-2015) attracted only language teachers - of Bulgarian, German, Russian and predominantly - English. The course itself is of a blended learning format and the distance elements are implemented using Sofia University e-learning platform. The study modules deal with „*European educational policies*“, „*Psychological prerequisites and educational dimensions of multiculturalism*“, „*Pedagogical interactions*“, „*Interaction between linguistic disciplines at secondary school level*“, „*Structural, content and technological aspects of modern language education*“, „*Knowledge about the EU*“, „*Structural and technological aspects of using social media in education*“, „*Web-based tools in education*“, „*Action research for teachers*“. The curriculum of the course has been developed by lecturers at the Faculty of Philosophy and the Department of In-service Teacher Training in an attempt to capitalise on the experience from the afore-mentioned EU-funded projects along with current trends in teacher education. The learning experience for the teachers is based on core e-learning principles (Stoicheva, Tsvetkova & Mavrodieva: 2013)<sup>6</sup>, allowing the teachers to experiment with using Web 2.0 tools and social networks in their own classrooms. Intercultural and civic education as well as knowledge about EU integration are also emphasized on through interactive techniques such as debates, simulations, small-scale research and so on. Thus the trained teachers discuss and analyse how they can most effectively help their students to „experience European integration..., to get to know Europe’s cultural heritage... to learn languages, but also to be able to communicate in a multicultural environment“<sup>7</sup>. In

<sup>6</sup> Stoicheva, M., N.Tsvetkova, I. Mavrodieva (2013), Social Media, Social Networks, and Personal Learning Networks in an Academic Setting. Национално издателство Аз-Буки, сп. Чуждоезиково обучение/ Foreign Language Teaching, кн. 1. София. The article discusses the place of these in an academic setting in BA, MA and in-service training courses for teachers.

<sup>7</sup> See Shikova (compilation and editing) (2012) I am a Citizen of the EU. Handbook, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski publishing house, Sofia. The handbook contains didactic materials on various EU-related topics which can be implemented in extracurricular activities as well as in regular classes of languages, History, Geography, Civic Education, etc.

these first two runs of the course due to the specific profile of the trainees, opportunities to share and develop own teaching practices related to promoting synergies between language disciplines in line with the EU multilingualism policy are sought after throughout the course. In addition, the potential for doing action research on incorporating EU-related topics in other disciplines was also noted. Thus since 2012, the formal inclusion of the topic of the European dimension of education has become a fact with the start of the post-graduate distance-learning course „European Dimensions of Bulgarian secondary Education“ within the national upgrading (in-service) qualification framework for teachers in the country. The success of the course has also brought forward the necessity to take adequate steps to approach teaching about the EU at the pre-service level of teacher education systematically.

## **The EU PETR Project**

Encouraged by the successful implementation of these truly European ideas into continuous teacher education in the country, the faculty of Philosophy initiated the EU PETR project (Promoting Excellence in Teaching and Research in EU Studies at Primary and Secondary School Level through Digital and Virtualisation Tools) which is implemented within the new *Erasmus Plus* programme, under the Jean Monnet Action (2015-2016).

The project aims to enhance the quality and bring about innovative changes in the pre-service and in-service training of teachers with regard to EU studies and to encourage the implementation of ICT in teaching EU studies at school. Among the core outputs are the development of an innovative online platform for producing and storing videos of discussions, lectures, seminars in a video repository, a virtual classroom allowing broadcasting via the internet and electronic learning materials on EU topics and EU integration. To ensure the link between pre-service and in-service teacher education, the project team consists of academic staff from the Faculty of Philosophy, the Faculty of Education and the Department of In-service Teacher Training. The activities are directed towards teachers at all levels of secondary education and all subjects as well as to school principals and experts from the Regional Inspectorates of Education.

Since the project has a pronounced research strand dealing with the issues of implementing EU topics through employing ICT techniques at school, since its beginning different kinds of data have been collected and processed. To maximize the effects of the project, in a truly connectivist manner, a nation-wide teacher network (Teacher.bg) - a virtual community of Bulgarian teachers - has been involved serving as a critical friend, a community of practice and a mass-dissemination agent. This has allowed the project ideas to reach a big number of teachers throughout the country.

The tables below demonstrate the distribution of teachers according to type of school they work at (*Table 1*) and education level (*Table 2*). The numbers below have been generated through an online questionnaire completed by all teachers who have expressed willingness to join the project activities.

**Table 1. Distribution of teachers according to school type.**

School	Number of responses	%
General	435	76,3
Vocational	89	15,6
Specialised	15	2,6
No response	31	5,4
Total	570	100,0

The predominant number of interested educationalists belongs to those who teach at general comprehensive schools (these are the most common types of school in the country) and the number of teachers from vocational and specialised schools is much smaller. The relatively big number of non-responses may be interpreted as hesitation to select the first provided option as the question does not further decompose the „general“ to basic or secondary schools. However, in the second table we can see that all respondents have given an answer.

**Table 2. Distribution of teachers according to education level they teach at.**

Teaches at:	Number of responses	%
Primary	220	38,6
Lower secondary	248	43,5
Upper secondary	203	35,6
Total	570	100,0

Here the distribution is more or less equal which corresponds to the initial expectations of the project team that the nature of the project will be equally attractive to teachers across the levels of secondary education.

Recently, there has been an increased interest in making the discussion of EU matters at school a routine activity. On paper, EU matters are supposed to be part of History, Geography, Philosophy, Civic Education, languages, etc. Current research shows both primary and secondary school teachers are motivated to teach about Europe but they need to be supported with up-to-date materials and methodologies relevant to the particular age groups of the students and the peculiarities of the subject under which they will be incorporated. The table below sheds light on why teachers are interested in joining the project.

**Table 3. Teachers' motives to take part in the project activities.**

Motives	Number of responses	%
I am interested in the project theme.	245	43,0
In my opinion, the project theme is relevant to Bulgarian secondary education.	253	44,4
I think such topics have to be part of the subject-matter of each school subject.	238	41,8
I feel it is necessary to enrich my own knowledge about the EU.	220	38,6
I want to find out how to teach EU-related topics both attractively and effectively.	358	62,8

It is evident that more or less the first four options (more than could be selected) enjoy approximately the same popularity while the last one, which is directly linked to the three areas of teacher education outlined by the working group of Member State experts quoted above, is selected by more than half of the respondents. Studying closely the „other“ option will give a further insight into teachers’ motivation.

There are four packages of project activities - (a) distance learning module for post-graduate teacher training part of the national teacher qualification framework, (b) training modules for future teachers at pre-service level, (c) e-content generated and edited according to strict criteria of excellence in the course of the planned training events and (d) - a platform for interactive learning of and communication about teaching and research in EU studies it is envisaged that the EU PETR project will lead to:

- improved teaching quality and learning capacity;
- enhanced interest in European matters at a whole-university level;
- in-depth knowledge about the EU achieved via networking and online collaboration between primary and secondary teachers, teacher trainers and academics.

This will be facilitated by implementing EU matters at school using the potential for distance learning and creating new communities of teachers sharing practices. Applying modern ICTs in this area will guarantee the quality of the educational process. Forming highly qualified teams of specialists applying new teaching approaches is a prerequisite for generating new practices or refining and enriching existing ones.

If we study carefully the structure of responses to the question about the PQL of the surveyed teachers we cannot but note the high number of both interested teachers holding the highest PQL and of those on the threshold to their Third PQL (those holding the Forth and the Fifth).

**Table 4. Teachers’ Professional Qualification Levels.**

Professional Qualification Level	Number of responses	%
First	207	36,3
Second	62	10,9
Third	39	6,8
Fourth	113	19,8
Fifth	107	18,8
No response	42	7,4
Total	570	100,0

On the basis of the answers it can be inferred that there is a relative balance between holders of the different PQLs with those holding the highest being the most in number and those who have not started on the upgrading route being only 7,4%. This implies that the group has potential to generate and embrace change and innovation in the current pedagogic practices. On the other hand, there are prerequisites for active exchange of ideas among the participants.

The third run of the *European Dimensions of Bulgarian Secondary Education* post-graduate course which started at the beginning of 2015 involves teachers of all subjects and from all levels of secondary education. They are already experiencing the new in-service teacher training module developed under the EU PETR project.

## Conclusion

The discussion so far aimed at demonstrating that utilising the results and products of different projects can be implemented in the mainstream educational processes starting at primary school and going through the secondary and the tertiary levels into continuous education. It is possible indeed to bring together a pool of primary and secondary practising teachers and future teachers across the curriculum who to work actively on teaching and exploring EU studies matters. The example of the EU PETR project demonstrates how the preparation to teach about the EU for future teachers of various subjects at pre-service level can be supported by a sustainable EU strand in the national teacher upgrading framework thus providing continuity of ideas, access to teaching materials and methodologies which will directly influence positively the way EU integration, EU values and ideas are taught at primary and secondary school. The envisaged bottom-up and top-down involvement of key actors makes it possible for the process to receive the necessary support at individual, school, regional and national levels.

In the case of Bulgaria, as proved by the *Learning by Doing* project and the research data from the EU PETR project it is not enough to offer new materials dealing with EU topics at primary and secondary level. It is also necessary to develop a support environment for teachers to learn about it, experiment in class and then share their own classroom ideas with peers and trainers. Furthermore, if EU topics become part of the mainstream pre-service and in-service of teacher training in an engaging and innovative way, this will grant continuity across subjects and levels of education and sustainability of the effects of implementing good practices in teaching EU at schools throughout the country regardless of their geographic location.

Last but not least, it is of key significance to facilitate the cooperation between practitioners in different educational spheres in order to contribute to the processes of ensuring continuity and natural transition from one educational level to another (primary to secondary to tertiary to post-graduate and life-long learning). This exchange will be extremely beneficial for the Faculty of Philosophy and Sofia University as a whole as it will lead to cross-fertilisation of different specialities with regard to EU matters.

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