

**YOUNG PEOPLE OF WORKING AGE  
WITH BASIC OR LOWER EDUCATION  
IN BULGARIA – PARTICIPATION IN  
EDUCATION AND TRAINING  
(RESULTS OF FOCUS-GROUP  
DISCUSSIONS)**

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**Abstract:** *The young people of working age with basic or lower education in Bulgaria are characterized by relatively low levels of participation in education and training as a key tool for improving employability. In the context of low economic activity of the persons in this group, the issue of identifying barriers to their participation in education and training becomes the basis for formulating proposals for improvement of policies and measures in this field in the future. The main objective of this article is to systematize and present results of focus-group discussions to study obstacles to participation in education and training of young people of working age with basic and lower education. The focus groups included 164 representatives of stakeholders (municipal and regional administrations, Regional Education Office, employers' and trade union organizations, Labor Office Directorate, etc.) in 10 districts of Bulgaria. The results show that participation in education and training of young people of working age with basic and lower education is hampered by a variety of obstacles that are specific to this youth group: low motivation, deficits in cognitive skills, undeclared employment and etc. The focus group discussions also reveal an additional emphasis on the social role of individuals in this youth group as parents and as a component of a family environment that has the potential to "guarantee" a future influx of new additions to low-educated population groups. The specificities should be taken into account both in future research in this field and in formulating effective policies and measures to encourage participation in education and training of young people of working age with basic and lower education.*

**Keywords:** educational structure of the population; participation in education and training; economic activity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Modern demographic processes in Bulgaria are characterised by a gradual decrease in the number and relative share of youth groups in working age, which is related to the dynamics of both natural and migratory movement of the population. There is a growing interest in the state and dynamics of the educational structure of young people in working age as a traditional factor for economic activity and employment. Research reveals that higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of economic activity and employment and vice versa, low levels of economic activity and employment are characteristic of people with low levels of education (Borissova-Marinova, K., 2008; Borissova, K., Moraliyska, St., 2011; Hristova, A., 2017). In specialised studies, the negative consequences of the low educational levels typical of the respective population groups on their opportunities for sustainable integration in the employment and labour market, and in relation to the dynamics of their income and quality of life (Teulings, CN 2005; Sianesi, B., Van Reenen, J., 2003; Gesthuizen, M., Solga, H. and Kunster, R., 2011, Atanasova, M., 2011a). The low levels of economic activity and employment of certain groups of the population are considered as a prerequisite for a relatively limited contribution to economic growth and development of various socio-economic systems (Chobanova, R., 2012; Raleva, St., 2014).

Changes in the educational structure of young people need to be analysed in connection with the current dynamics of labour demand. In the context of revival of the labour market and increase in the economic activity and employment in general involving the population of working age, the emphasis is on future expected difficulties concerning sustainable employment to be faced by the persons with low educational levels in Bulgaria: “The shift in the labour force demand from the sectors using labour force with low qualification levels towards sectors intensively employing high skilled labour force prompts that the former growth model has already fallen into obsolescence. Bulgaria saw high economic growth and reduction of poverty rates from 2000 to 2008 owed to the rising employment and labour productivity in sectors relying on low-skilled labour, which was mainly observed in trade, transport, construction and industry. After 2008, the sectors hiring high-skilled labour force such as information and communication technology, financial and business services saw a rapid development” (Levin, V. et al., 2016: 13) [in Bulgarian]. Viewed from such positions, over the last few years, young people of primary or lower education levels have been a traditional target of analyses and policies both in Bulgaria and in other countries. A significant number of (nationally representative inclusive) surveys was conducted going into the main factors affecting the status and the dynamics of this young people’s population group. (Spielhofer, T., 2010; Hippel von, A. and Tippelt, R., 2010; ESTAT, 2014; Levin, V. et al., 2016; UNICEF, 2015). Data demonstrates that in the context of participation in the academic school system obligatory for children aged up to 16 (pursuant to Art. 53(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, the school training until the age of 16 is obligatory), over the last ten years, the relative share of persons with elementary and lower education levels among the 25–34 young people’s group marked a slight growth. In addition, what is observed is a reduction in the share of young people in working age being

involved in education or training entailing all consequences thereof impacting their competencies and their potential for their successful integration into labour force and employment. (Atanasova, M., 2011b; Atanasova, M., Vladimirova, K., 2014) [in Bulgarian]

**The main objective** of this article is to systematise and present results from the conducted focus-group discussions on studying any hurdles hindering the participation in education and training of young people in working age with primary or lower education levels. To achieve this objective, a number of research tasks was implemented, with these tasks being systematised in two main strands: analysis of the state and dynamics of the participation in education and training of young people with primary and lower education in Bulgaria; research and systematisation of hurdles hindering the participation in education and training of young people with primary and lower education levels.

The complex interdisciplinary essence of the agenda researched implies imposing a number of limitations. In the process of the study, the educational level is characterised by the classification of the basic educational levels applied by Eurostat<sup>1</sup>, with the parameters of the quality of education and training falling beyond the subject of the present research not being commented. The indicator for participation in education and training is measured by the relative share of persons in the respective age group who have participated in formal and non-formal education and training (according to Eurostat methodology): this indicator is among the key parameters of policies in this area, among others (Borisova-Marinova, K. et al., 2018: 72) [in Bulgarian], however the latter are not analysed in this article. The study of hurdles hindering the participation in education and training of young people with low education levels is the target of a number of studies in both Bulgaria and the EU (ESTAT, 2014; UNICEF, 2015), with these highlighting a variety of approaches to using and defining the conceptual framework with basic terminology: hurdles, barriers, restrictions, obstacles, etc. The current study uses the term ‘hurdles’, which is understood as “problems to be overcome” (Spielhofer, T., 2010, 11) According to the methodology of one of the periodic statistical surveys of Eurostat, *Adult Education Survey*, the condition and dynamics of various hurdles to participation in education and training is monitored through various indicators, among which, for the purposes of this article, stand out two, which for Bulgaria report the highest values (compared to the other EU Member States) for young people with primary and lower education and who are related to the cognitive abilities of the person concerned: “non-conformity with the requirements” and “the suggested trainings are not appropriate”. Data from the latest edition of the Education and Training Survey (2016) shows that in Bulgaria, 39.3% of low-educated young people indicated non-compliance with the requirements as a hurdle (against the EU average of 16.5%), and 25.6% noted that the training offered was not appropriate (against 14.3% on average for the EU). Within the existing diversity of approaches

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<sup>1</sup> International Standard Classification of Education: persons with primary and lower education (ISCED 0-2); persons with secondary education – intermediate education (ISCED 3); persons with higher education – tertiary education (ISCED 5 7).