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## CONTENTS

Reviewers for 2016, Vol.2, Issue 1 and Issue 2, .....	76
<b>Comprehensive quality assessment in higher education</b> .....	77
<i>Maria Stepanova</i>	
<b>Reflections on the Relation between National Cultures and Innovations in Education - the case of Bulgaria</b> .....	89
<i>Ellie Boyadzhieva</i>	
Call for submissions .....	104
Vol.2, Issue 2 metrics .....	105

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## COMPREHENSIVE QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The article presents an analysis of approaches towards the development of a system of comprehensive quality assessment of education based on an example of one of Russia's major institutions of higher education. The system encompasses all the participants in the educational process and related stakeholders. Comprehensiveness and balance of the quality assessment is achieved by unifying the centralised and decentralised approaches, whereby part of the work is carried out on the faculty or departmental level, while the other part is undertaken at a university-wide level. Based on this analysis, a number of practical recommendations were made in the aims of improving the quality of education in a number of areas. The implementation of these recommendations has already produced real and significant results for the students. This is also reflected in the results of the regular surveys undertaken to assess students' satisfaction with the quality of the master's programme in linguistics.

**Keywords:** higher education, quality assessment, quality assurance, stakeholders, student satisfaction

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Quality is one of the core values of modern higher education. At the present time higher education quality assessment is an important objective for universities, since the quality of the education services which they offer to a significant degree predetermines their ability to function and develop normally. It also determines the level of financial support provided by all categories of stakeholders (state, academic and business communities, students etc.), as well as a series of non-tangible benefits.

This study is based on the author's many years of experience as a teacher of English and Translation Studies on the master's programme in the Institute of Humanities at the Peter the Great Polytechnic University of Saint Petersburg, one of the largest HE institutes in Russia, and also in her capacity as administrative coordinator of the education process. This experience has allowed the author to affirm that universities cannot function effectively without rigorous quality assessment of all aspects of the education process.

According to Article 11(a) of the World Declaration of Higher Education, "Quality in higher education is a multidimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions, and activities: teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipment, services to the community and the academic environment" (UNESCO, 1998). As a consequence of this approach, the quality assessment process for higher education institutions and subdivisions thereof requires the creation of a complex, multi-component system. The effective quality assessment of university educational activities requires that a huge quantity of factors and conditions be taken into account.

In the modern environment of active academic mobility, students cannot only select their educational establishment, but also change it at any stage of their education (Munteanu, Ceobanu, Bobâlcă, & Anton, 2010). The consequence is an increase in competition between universities, leading to the need for internal monitoring and assessment of the level of satisfaction of the users and all stakeholders in the quality of education services provided.

Given that the quality of education services is an aggregation of the properties and characteristics of the education process which ascribe to this process the ability to satisfy the educational needs of specific users, the HE establishment must "establish the

expected and assume the unexpected needs of specific users” (Gaidukova, 2013), in order to satisfy these needs to the maximum. To this end, the main groups of users of educational services at a given phase in higher education must be determined.

The key users of the educational services provided by a given HE institution are internal and external. According to the opinions of Russian researchers, the following groups of users can be determined: internal users, direct external users and indirect external users (Masterov et al., 2012, p.8). Within these groups, a determining role is played by such users as school graduates and their parents, students, graduates, employers, the state and society as a whole (Masterov et al., 2012, p.9).

In a comprehensive assessment of the quality of higher education, it would be inappropriate to speak only of the users of education services. The notion of “stake holders” is broader and covers not only direct and indirect users of education services, but also those who have an interest (stake) in the activity of the institution and are capable of influence. In addition to the users, one must also take into account the teaching staff, employees, administration and management of the university (Moraru, 2012; Kuzu, Gökbel, & Güleş, 2013). Stakeholders can be categorised as external and internal, individual and group (partners), state and private, academic and non-academic (Kuzu et al., 2013, p. 282). Stakeholders and their various groups in the area of HE pursue a variety of interests, but they are unified by a common purpose – to increase the quality of education provided by universities.

Thus, the primary object of universities is to determine the main groups of stakeholders and users of the services provided by them, and to define those indicators of service quality satisfaction which can be assessed. The provision of feedback to the university from stakeholders and the users of education services is a necessary condition to bring about corrective actions to improve the quality of education.

The main models referred to in the literature on the subject of consumer satisfaction are compliance or non-compliance with expectations. One of these is the Disconfirmation Model, according to which satisfaction is a function of the divergence between user expectation and the real quality of the product of service (Huang, Yang, & Hampton, 2011, p.78). It is this model that is most frequently used in the assessment of user satisfaction with the quality of higher education.

Assessment of the level of satisfaction of users and all stakeholders is a key aspect underlying the quality of the education. Universities need to create a system to provide for regular and multi-lateral monitoring of the level of satisfaction of all stakeholders, as well as the dynamism of their expectations.

One of the key groups of internal users, and the largest, of the education process in HE is, of course, the students. Although the academic environment continues to persist in not accepting the notion of a student as a user or client (Mark, 2013), at the present time this concept is generally recognised. Once they leave the confines of university, graduates as a product of its education processes, become external users of its services (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008), both in their capacity as members of society, tax payers, and in the more distant future, perhaps even employers and parents of the next generations of students.

Thus the student is the key user of HE education services. However, the quality of education should not be assessed solely on the basis of student satisfaction. This indicator cannot be the only source of information about the quality of education provided. This is due to the objective existence of an asymmetry of competences. The assessment of any service is subjective, and assessment of education services is made more difficult by the existence of an asymmetry in the competence of the users and suppliers of the services.

The users of education services are frequently insufficiently qualified to provide an informed assessment of the quality of the services provided by professionals. The service supplier (educational establishment) possesses much more information about their quality and quantity than the user (student). As Titov indicates, the asymmetry of competence in HE establishments is exacerbated by the complexity of the services provided by the higher education facility. This asymmetry is further exacerbated by the fact that the users of paid education services are students, or, in the majority of cases, their parents (Titova, 2008, p. 14). Thus, students, especially during their first years, do not possess sufficient competences to make an objective assessment of the education received, the qualifications of the teaching staff, or the benefit of a given discipline, etc. As Moraru (2012) suggests, the level of satisfaction on the part of the students and their parents is directly proportional to the reputation of the university (which is far from

being a guarantee of the real quality of education) and corresponds to the level of employment of its graduates and putative income after graduation.

Without possessing the entirety of information due to this asymmetry of competences, the student and later graduate as a result of acquiring an educational product of inappropriate quality (Merkulova, 2007) may waste time and money, lose out on favourable opportunities and miss out on the opportunity to enhance their social and economic competitiveness.

At the present time, a unified approach towards the assessment of user and stakeholder satisfaction in the education process has not been developed. The majority of existing assessment methods consist of assigning a numerical mark to the level of satisfaction on the part of the user with regard to a number of factors listed on a questionnaire (Eliseeva, 2012, p. 107). The main problem is the creation of list of criteria for each group of stakeholders and users of educational services based on a variety of parameters.

The majority of studies examining student satisfaction take the gender criterion into account as an obligatory aspect (Huang, Yang, & Hampton, 2011; Munteanu et al., 2010) and frequently categorise in according to age groups and year of study. When designing a procedure to analyse user and stakeholder satisfaction with the quality of education services for Masters degrees, there is a certain rationality in implementing ideas developed by Romanian researchers about the need for a separate assessment of the satisfaction of quality of the education process amongst students with varying degrees of academic achievement (Munteanu et al., 2010).

The general scheme of the student survey should include the following units:

1. "General Information" Unit, which will allow for the collation of base information about the respondents, including their age, gender, family status, previous education, sphere of education, etc. This is necessary, in order to define compliance of the totality of information and then for clustering of data and the definition of correlations.

2. "General Assessment of Satisfaction with Education" Unit assesses the degree to which students are satisfied with the quality of education as a whole, and how far it fulfils their expectations and needs.
3. "Teaching Staff Performance" Unit assesses of students' satisfaction with the performance of the professorial and teaching staff as a whole and in individual disciplines. Development of this unit must take into account the fact that the data obtained will be used to take decisions about teaching staff career development and competitive advancement, etc.
4. The "Educational Support" unit assesses students' satisfaction with the curriculum, access to literature, equipment, auditoria and facilities.
5. The "Interpersonal Interaction" unit shows the level of students' satisfaction with communication with students on their course, teaching staff, auxiliary personnel (administrative staff and student liaison staff).
6. The "Extramural Activity" unit assesses students' satisfaction with sports, cultural and other types of events organised at the University.

Depending on the specific objectives, the survey may include additional units or exclude existing ones. However, the survey must not limit itself only to monitoring students' satisfaction with the education provided to them. The assessment of the quality of education must be multi-lateral and include all the participants in the educational process, as well as all the stakeholders. This includes students, their families, (since they directly or indirectly financially support the education of the student in HE), HE administration, teaching staff, employers, the state (and corresponding agencies), as well as society as a whole. The intra-institutional monitoring system should include students, graduate, employers and teaching staff.

When developing an intra-institutional assessment of the quality of education and, in particular, of the satisfaction of users and stakeholders, the most balanced approach is to unify the centralised and decentralised approaches, wherein part of the monitoring (emphasis on narrow and specific questions) is undertaken at faculty or departmental level, and part (students' assessment of the curriculum/curricula, satisfaction with education conditions etc.) should be undertaken at a university-wide level.

The university's objective in monitoring of the level of user and stakeholder satisfaction is to determine compliance of the quality of education with expectations, determining specific problems and area for improvement, discovering new needs and expectations on the part of the users, and defining trends. Based on the results of monitoring, specific management decisions can be taken, and corrective actions implemented (centralised but with the participation of coordinators in the specific sub-divisions or programmes).

Surveys are the key instrument in monitoring. This is the cheapest way of obtaining data whose reliability depends on the quality of the questions, consequent interpretation and processing. Each question must produce quantitative and qualitative data required for taking management decisions. The quantitative data must be measurable. Each survey must contain identical scales to facilitate the processing of obtained data and the consequent adequate interpretation of the results.

Modern IT allows for rapid online surveys and data acquisition, already processed in automatic (or semi-automatic) mode. The main difficulty lies in a precise and literate approach to devising the questions and evaluation scales, in order to achieve objective results and effective management decisions based upon them.

Surveys must be carried out on a regular basis and the data obtained must be comparable, i.e. identical questions must be included in the survey over a number of years, in order to evaluate dynamics. The frequency of the surveys depends on the specific objectives and aims defined by the University and its sub-divisions.

Reports on the results of the surveys should be submitted to the management of the University and its sub-divisions after processing. The information should be visualised and the conclusions clearly defined.

In general terms, centralised internal monitoring can be shown in the following way (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Centralised internal monitoring of user and stakeholder satisfaction with the quality of education services

<b>Category of persons surveyed</b>	<b>Monitoring stages</b>	<b>Periods and frequency</b>	<b>Objectives</b>
<b>STUDENTS</b>	Entrance	Single, on admission to 1 <sup>st</sup> year (separate for bachelors and masters students)	Indication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations of education course</li> <li>• Motivation for study</li> <li>• Factors which influence the choice of HE establishment, area of study, etc.</li> </ul>
	Periodical (regular)	Upon completion of each academic year (or term)	Indication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compliance of education process with expectations</li> <li>• Problems;</li> <li>• Reasons for dissatisfaction;</li> <li>• Positive aspects</li> </ul>
	Final	Single, upon completion of education (separate for bachelors and masters students)	Indication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compliance of education process with expectations</li> <li>• Level of satisfaction with education provided</li> <li>• Reasons for dissatisfaction;</li> <li>• Positive aspects</li> <li>• Employments plans</li> </ul>
	Project	Upon implementation and completion of a new project affecting students (education, extra-mural activity, facilities)	Indication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possible reaction to innovations; willingness to change (during project preparation stage);</li> <li>• Reactions to implementation, reasons for dissatisfaction; positive aspects (during project implementation);</li> <li>• Satisfaction with results (upon completion of project)</li> </ul>
<b>EMPLOYERS</b>	Periodical (regular) – for all employers	Annually	Indication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations of graduates (qualification, level of education)</li> <li>• Satisfaction with the level of education;</li> <li>• Desire for change according to individual aspects of the education;</li> <li>• Desire to continue employing</li> </ul>

			graduates of the University <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Markets trends etc.</li> </ul>
	Concluding – for employers offering work experience and internships to students of the University	Upon completion of production work experience	Indication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations of interns (qualification, level of education)</li> <li>• Satisfaction with the level of education;</li> <li>• Desire for change according to individual aspects of the education;</li> <li>• Desires to continue to cooperate with the University;</li> <li>• Desires to employ graduates of the University upon completion of their education</li> <li>• Markets trends etc.</li> </ul>
<b>GRADUATES</b>	Periodical	Every 3, 5, 10 years after completion of university	Indication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of employment of graduates according to speciality</li> <li>• Of the level of satisfaction with education provided</li> <li>• Reasons for dissatisfaction;</li> <li>• Dynamics of attitude to the quality of education obtained and satisfaction.</li> </ul>
	Periodical	Annually	Definition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compliance of education process with expectations</li> <li>• Problems;</li> <li>• Reasons for dissatisfaction;</li> <li>• Best practices etc.</li> </ul>
<b>TEACHING STAFF</b>	Project	Upon implementation and completion of new project affecting educational activity.	Indication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possible reaction to innovations; willingness to change, opposition to change (during project preparation stage);</li> <li>• Reactions to implementation, reasons for dissatisfaction; positive aspects (during project implementation);</li> <li>• Satisfaction with results (upon completion of project)</li> </ul>

Decentralised monitoring is carried out by each specific sub-division (institute, faculty, department), in order to obtain operational data to support decision-making at

the sub-divisional level. The decision to implement monitoring is taken by the sub-divisional management. At the same time, monitoring must not contradict the general concept of the University in the area of user and stakeholder satisfaction analysis. This will need agreement and consultations with those responsible for centralised monitoring.

Thus, there must be an integrated approach to ensuring and assessing the quality of HE. The balanced approach is optimal and consists of unification of the centralised and decentralised approaches. Part of the work is undertaken at faculty or department level, and part (for example, student assessment of the courses attended etc.) should be undertaken at a university-wide level.

This approach is being implemented at the Peter the Great Polytechnic University of Saint Petersburg in the assessment of student satisfaction with the quality of education in the Linguistics Masters programme. A survey of students enrolled on this programme has been ongoing over the past two years. The results of the study show that as whole the students are satisfied with the quality of Masters education provided to them (51% of students are completely satisfied and 36% are partially satisfied). The highest average assessment marks were awarded to such aspects of education as students' intellectual and professional growth, interesting courses, relatively low cost of education, interesting social life and student life, as well as the development of relationships with fellow students which could be useful for the future. Nevertheless, a number of areas could be improved. The survey stressed a need for improvement in the following areas: course content; education support; material and technical facilities; and provision of teaching staff.

Students expressed their greatest level of satisfaction with interpersonal relations during the education process. This forms the basis for the conclusion that the Institute of Humanities of the Peter the Great Polytechnic University of Saint Petersburg has succeeded in creating a secure psychological atmosphere. Thus, the interpersonal relationships between students, students and teaching staff and administrative personnel is rated very highly by students and consequently there is no need for radical improvements in this area in the near future.

The most problematic aspect according to students is the “development of relationships with potential employers which might be useful in the future”. This is explained by the fact that employers at the present time are insufficiently attracted to the Masters programmes examined here. There are other areas which could be improved.

After analysis, recommendations for improvement were made in the following areas:

1. Content of education
2. Material and technical facilities
3. Teaching staff
4. Teaching support
5. Marketing of the masters programmes

At the present time, these recommendations have been transformed into management decisions which are easily implemented in the education and organisational processes. The implementation of these decisions has already provided real and important results for the students. This has also been shown in the results of the regular surveys.

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# REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN NATIONAL CULTURES AND INNOVATIONS IN EDUCATION - THE CASE OF BULGARIA

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## Abstract

Pluralism, multiculturalism, learner autonomy and motivation have become buzz expressions discussed widely both by the Common European Framework of Reference and the European Centre for Modern Languages. However, despite the hard work to implement these new approaches in the classroom, some countries seem to be more adaptive compared to others. In the author's opinion, the answer is rooted in the specifics of national cultures. The article discusses the roles of teacher and student as an archetypal case of micro social organization as they reveal typical patterns of social behaviour. Provided is a detailed description of the specifics of the Bulgarian national culture along the six dimensions of Hofstede's theory of organizations and cultures with regard to the educational system. The readiness of the Bulgarian teachers and students to comply with the concepts of pluralistic approaches, multiculturalism, learner-centred teaching and autonomy in the Bulgarian classroom are explored. The general conclusion is that these ideas are highly culture-sensitive and the success of their implementation depends on the closeness of the cultures where they emerged and the recipient countries to which they are exported.

**Key words:** education, culture, cultural dimensions, autonomy, multiculturalism

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This article is part of a succession of publications of the author over the past three years devoted to the intrinsic relation between national cultures, educational systems and innovations in Bulgaria's national educational system. Each of these publications focuses on a particular aspect of the relation between culture (in anthropological sense) and education as a socio-cultural product such as learner-centred teaching (Boyadzhieva, 2014b; Boyadzhieva, 2016a), learner autonomy (Boyadzhieva, 2014c; Boyadzhieva, 2016a; Boyadzhieva, 2016b), learner motivation (Boyadzhieva, 2014b; Boyadzhieva, 2015b), multiculturalism and pluralistic approaches (Boyadzhieva, 2014a; Boyadzhieva, 2015a). The analysis of the central issues in each of these articles, as well as in this one, is consistently conducted along the lines of Hofstede's theory of cultures and organizations developed within the past 10 years (Hofstede, 1998; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov 2010).

### **Education: a product and a producer of culture**

National educational systems are major elements of every national culture along with its language, religion, national values and social organizations. As such, they are products of national cultures. On the other hand, educational practices of a society are an important factor for the reproduction of the organizational behaviour patterns of a society. Along with training in particular disciplines, education systems can also be seen as carriers of historically established cultural models responsible for the transmission of skills, ideas and attitudes based on conventional historical practices. This is why national educational systems are ambivalent by nature – on the one hand, they are products of historically established cultural habits and behaviour, on the other, they are responsible for transmitting these particular cultural beliefs and values onto the next generations in order to ensure sustainability of culture in time.

However, in times of worldwide and regional globalization, national educational systems face the challenge to comply with innovations based on universalist educational ideas aiming at global unification of approaches and practices in education. This applies especially to the EU member countries where new approaches are

introduced under the “Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (‘ET 2020’)”<sup>1</sup> affecting all stages of their national education systems.

The issues raised in this article are based on the assumption that the attitudes towards the implementation of new approaches in the Bulgarian educational system are highly determined by both teachers and students as representatives of Bulgarian culture.

Previous observations (Boyadzhieva, 2014c; Boyadzhieva, 2016a; Boyadzhieva, 2016b) show that the degree of acceptance and applicability of novelties in educational systems fluctuates depending on national cultures, part of which are the society’s attitudes to and expectations of the national educational system. Results show that changes in education, including new policies, are instigated more easily in countries that have a similar cultural profile with those where the innovations originated, while in cultures with different profiles their implementation may face serious problems.

### **Learner-centred education, autonomy, motivation and multiculturalism: a glimpse into history**

At the outset, it needs noting that the widely proclaimed idea of multicultural education is not a European invention. It was imported into the EU from the USA and included in the educational policies of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML<sup>2</sup>) in Graz. Embraced by European educators and policy makers, multiculturalism has become especially loud in the last few years as it was reinforced by external factors: the growing migrant flow into Europe resulting in changes of the demographic profile of many European countries and causing major changes in the political orientation of many countries, culminating in Brexit<sup>3</sup>.

Another important fact to consider is that not only did multiculturalism serve the needs of American education amidst the Cold War, but it also became possible in a culture commonly defined as a *melting pot* type. The term ‘*melting pot*’, first used in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/education>

<sup>2</sup> European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe - <https://fiply.com/more-etc/ecml-european-centre-of-modern-languages>

<sup>3</sup> The idea of multicultural education emerged as a side effect of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s in the US (Banks, 2010: 4; Fullinwider, 2003). Thus, it reflects a particular historical stage in the development of the US educational philosophy, which arose out of specific practical needs of America’s education system. With time multiculturalism grew to eventually include “... diverse courses, programs, and practices that education institutions [adopted] to respond to the demands, needs, and aspirations of the various groups [*in the US* - my remark].” (Banks, 2010: 5).

1887, describes places or the population of such places where “a variety of races, cultures, or individuals assimilate into a cohesive whole” and which presupposes “a process of blending...” (Merriam-Webster, n. d.). None of the European national cultures does belong to such a type of culture, which discharges the notion multiculturalism of its notional content. Nowadays, the Common European Framework of Reference for languages describe it as a means of overcoming ethnic differences among and prejudices of the nations in united Europe.

Last but not least, multiculturalism is both directly and indirectly related to other key educational ideas such as learner autonomy, motivation and learner-centred teaching. Although these notions appeared for the first time in relation to foreign language teaching (most probably because it was the most rapidly developing field in education in the 1960s and 1970s and a profitable export business for the Anglo-Saxon countries), they quickly encompassed the overall training process at school.

This connection trails the following logic: multiculturalism supports the idea that students and their backgrounds and experiences should be placed in the centre of education and thus help them develop a positive perception of themselves by demonstrating knowledge about their own culture, history, attitudes and beliefs. This refers to the desired shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching. Next, learners’ positive perceptions are expected to strengthen their ability to make choices and become autonomous, which in turn is expected to enhance their motivation. This type of training contributes to the overall mutual understanding between diverse groups, which is a general aim in education deserving admiration. However, the extent (if at all) of its applicable in different cultures is a completely different issue.

### **Formal education as a micro model of society**

Educational systems are micro model of societies, thus national education is a micro cosmos representing national culture. Similarly to the Parent and the Child or the Employer and the Employee, the Teacher and the Student is an archetypal pair. It exists in virtually any society regardless of geographical location or time. Complexities of their relationship, on the one hand, are due to the different social positions teachers and students have in a society and, on the other hand, to the differences in the established patterns of the teacher/student interaction in a particular society. The former are

universal for the pair, while the latter are particular and culturally biased. The differences in the ways parents and the society as a whole expect students to learn represent another specific factor depending on the historically established educational patterns.

In medieval European education, teachers acted as providers of knowledge, while learners were supposed to be an empty vessel. This model remained unchanged until the 1970s. As far as foreign language teaching is concerned, this role distribution was typical at the time of the dominance of the grammar-translation and the audio-lingual methods. With the development of the communicative approach in the late 1960s, and later on, of constructivism, the views about the roles of teacher and learner changed. Teachers came to be seen as facilitators and learners as an active participant in the teaching/learning process in and out the language classroom. As already mentioned, philosophical foundations of teaching and learning foreign languages were transferred into the educational philosophy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a whole. As a result, 'learner autonomy' (Holec, 1981; Little et al., 2002; Benson, 2006; Gardner, 2004) and 'motivation' (Dickinson, 1995) as concepts originating in the area of foreign language teaching became buzz-words related to the shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach in education and part of the methodology related to the philosophy of multiculturalism.

### **Hofstede's Theory of Cultures**

Hofstede's theory of organizations and cultures seems to be the most appropriate framework for the purpose of the following discussion as it focuses on social and psychological parameters that underlie the basic attitudes and understanding of the social roles of teachers and students. In my opinion, this theory is undoubtedly helpful when formal education is concerned because, as mentioned above, social behaviour in education environment maps the basic beliefs and expectations governing the acceptable social behaviour of a given society. Although there may be some second thoughts as to how indicative a universal theory of culture may be when a particular society is concerned, there is no doubt that Hofstede's theory is able to capture most of the intrinsic features of national cultures.

My choice to use this particular theory among various other theories as rationale for the discussion below needs a brief explanation. First and foremost, Hofstede's pioneering systemic cultural theory is the only one that has proved over the last 35

years to be able to explain why and how national (and regional) system of values may influence the groups' societal and organizational behaviour thus providing a *tertium comparationis* for comparing and explaining different cultures. Second, it is extremely relevant today, when differences between cultures have become an unescapable issue in both politics and economy. Last but not least, despite some critiques of Hofstede's theory (McSweeney, 2002; Gerhard, 2005; Venaik & Brewer, 2013), re-analysis of the existing data and factor analysis used in the renowned World Values Survey <sup>4</sup> confirmed the validity of Hofstede's value scales. The main implications of Hofstede's theory have been re-confirmed especially when the power distance, individualism, term orientation and indulgence dimensions were correlated with values in similar research (Schwartz, 2006; Inglehart, & Norris, 2009, Khatri, 2009).

Hofstede defines culture as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another' (Hofstede, 2009:24; Hofstede, 2010; Hofstede Homepage, n. d.). According to him and his team, culture should be described and explained along the lines of six cultural dimensions that are different but to some extent interdependent. As a result, different constellation patterns of social behaviour are isolated, each reflecting the specifics of a given culture. Hofstede's cultural dimensions are individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, term orientation, masculinity and indulgence. In the following discussion, Bulgarian culture is identified along these dimensions and the implications for the educational system are discussed.

### **Discussion**

The first dimension is individualism (IND). Individualism differentiates between individualistic and collectivistic societies. Bulgarian culture is a typical collective culture scoring 30 along this dimension (Hofstede Homepage – Bulgaria, n. d.). The implications of this state of affairs are the following: teachers and learners form two different groups, where learners consider teachers as outgroup members and vice versa. The in-group relationship dominates task and the outgroup members are supposed to be natural enemies. There is no possibility for an individual to belong to two groups within one discourse simultaneously. This induces an 'either-or' type of group belonging which leaves no possibility of finding a medium space. This in essence prevents co-working

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

between the two archetypal groups as aim setting and task fulfilment are driven by different in-group motivation and expectations.

The second dimension is power distance (PD). It 'expresses the attitude of a society towards the inevitable existence of social inequalities' (ibid.). Cultures are classified in two opposing groups with high and low PD respectively. Both types accept that the society is organized in a social hierarchy that makes the society able to work as a whole. The difference is that in cultures with high PD, this hierarchy is thought of as reflecting inherent inequalities. In such societies, centralization is undisputable; students expect directives from above; the ideal teacher is a benevolent autocrat and his/her decisions cannot be refuted. The high power distance of BG scoring 70 in this dimension indicates rigid centralization. Both teachers and students expect clear instructions: teachers from their superiors and students from teachers, respectively. As a result, both groups follow passively the instructions of a few persons at the top without taking part in the decision making process. The communication flow is usually vertical following top-bottom directionality. With few exceptions, horizontal communication is little and concealed. Bulgarian society as a whole still believes that students should show respect to their teachers because they are older and thus deserve obedience. Until recently, it was also believed that teachers are highly competent, but now both students and parents sometimes question this belief. Despite such occasional cases, however, the overall situation remains generally unchanged as both students and parents are aware of the fact that high power distance gives almost unlimited rights to those higher in the hierarchy.

It can be concluded that collectivism combined with high power distance in Bulgarian culture helps maintaining a teacher-centred education and makes the shift to learner-centred one extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The same applies to the development of learner autonomy. In-group belonging and power distance do not allow collaboration between teachers and students to an extent that allows building autonomy which at this stage depends fully on the willingness and openness of individual teachers. A direct consequence of the existing high PD enhanced by the in-group sense of belonging is unethical behaviour on the part of both teachers and students, a situation that is taken for granted by the society.

Uncertainty avoidance (UA) is defined as ‘the way a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known which results in anxiety’ (ibid.). This dimension evaluates the degree of anxiety a culture experiences when making decisions related to future actions. UA also deals with what motivates the individuals in society to act and is directly related to motivation.

Bulgaria’s high UA with score of 85 indicates that society as a whole needs rules, which is an emotional necessity and which requires rigid codes of belief and behaviour. Since security is the basis of individual’s motivation, unorthodox behaviour and ideas are not normally tolerated and innovations are generally resisted.

Masculinity (MASC) is the fourth dimension referring to ‘what motivates people: wanting to be the best (masculine cultures) or liking what you are doing (feminine cultures)’ (ibid.).

Bulgaria scoring 40 along this dimension is defined as a feminine type of society. The dominant values are well-being and caring for others. The quality of life is a sign of success and is generally considered more important than the standard of living. The focus is put on “working in order to live” and incentives like free time and flexibility are dominant. One consequence of the femininity of Bulgarian culture is that standing out from the crowd is an exception as it is not acceptable for the majority of the society. This explains why the concept of “popular student”, so typical of Anglo-Saxon education, does not exist in Bulgarian school jargon. Another interesting observation is related to the use of the adjective *shy*. *Shy* bears a definitely negative connotation when used as an attribute to *student* in English culture, describing a manner that “shows discomfort or lack of confidence in association with others”. *Shy* also implies “a constitutional shrinking from contact or close association with others, together with a wish to escape notice” (Shy, n.d.). One possible translation of the word in Bulgarian is “*skromen*”. When used as an adjective to describe people, it is generally positive and, when used to describe a student’s personality, it expresses the teacher’s appreciation of their behaviour at school.

The fifth dimension is term orientation (TO) or Confucian dynamism that refers to ‘how a society maintains some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future’ (Hofstede Homepage – Bulgaria, n. d.). World cultures fall into two opposing groups: with short and long TO.

With a score of 69 along this dimension, Bulgaria belongs to the group of short-term oriented cultures taking a more pragmatic approach and encouraging thrift and efforts as a way to prepare for the future. As a result, Bulgarians demonstrate the ability to adjust traditions to new realities. People generally believe that there is no absolute truth. Truth-values depend on particular situation and the moment of judgement. This is seemingly counter to the incentives of the high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance. However, the combination of the three dimensions explains why both Bulgarian students and teachers distrust the rules imposed by superior authorities and work against them following Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation principle of resistance by accepting them in writing and disregarding them in practice.

The last sixth dimension is indulgence (INDUL) which refers to 'the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses. Relatively weak control is called "indulgence" and relatively strong control is called "restraint" (ibid.). It emphasizes the degree to which children are socialized and is closely related to the system of education as schools, together with parents, are responsible for preparing them to become 'human'. Indulgence cultures show relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint countries, to which Bulgaria belongs with a very low score of 16 along Indulgence, on the contrary, show a tendency for cynicism and pessimism and control over their natural desires. Actions of both students and teachers in Bulgaria are restrained by social norms and with the prevailing feeling that indulgence is somewhat wrong.

As mentioned previously, the six dimensions are interdependent and often overlapping. For example, collectivist cultures are often cultures with high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance, which is the case with Bulgaria. Masculine cultures are more than often individualist cultures with low power distance. Indulgence and time orientation are also related in the sense that restrained cultures are most often short-term oriented, while long-term oriented cultures are frequently related to indulgent societies. Time orientation is also related to uncertainty avoidance, where short-term oriented societies typically show low scores in UC and vice versa - long-term oriented ones are usually of the high UC type. Bulgaria presents an exception to this correlation as it belongs to the short-term oriented cultures, but is simultaneously a typical high uncertainty avoidance one. Of course, these interrelations are not

compulsory and the dimensions should be discussed as complementary, which gives the theory the power to describe the different cultures both qualitatively and quantitatively.

The six dimensions and their relative weight within a culture show the distinct differences between national cultures as the table below illustrates. It demonstrates the drastic differences between Bulgarian and British cultural dimensions where the UK is an example of an Anglo-Saxon culture in particular and a typical representative of a Western type of culture, in general.

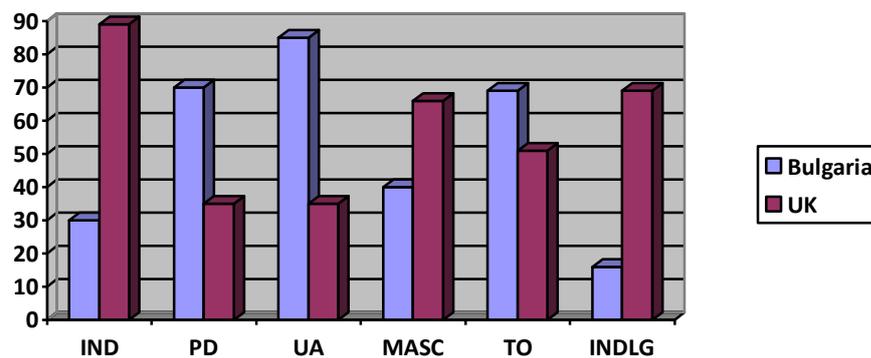


Figure 1: BG – UK – correlative scales

### Cultural implications for education

An important fact to bear in mind is that most innovations in educational philosophy and practice emerged in western societies and this is why they bear all features of western thinking mirroring the mind-set of western cultures. Their export to and implementation in countries where culture is almost opposite in their systems of beliefs and values seems to be primordially doomed. From the discussion above, it becomes evident that concepts like multiculturalism, autonomy and motivation in education (and not only in education), which are very sensitive to culture, are assessed as foreign intellectual products clashing with the Bulgarian in-group type of thinking. As member of the European Union, Bulgaria is obliged to adopt them in accordance with European Council directives. What happens, though, is that they are officially adopted and promoted in legal documents and reports but are not implemented in classroom educational practice.

The high uncertainty avoidance index of Bulgarian culture as a rule blocks creativity and innovations reinforcing fears of novelty in education. Accompanied by

typical collectivism and high power distance, it prevents the quick implementation of innovations by both teachers and students as the two groups share the belief that what is new is unknown and thus dangerous as the outcomes are uncertain. The combination of the three dimensions also explains why students in general do not possess the ability of self-reflection and avoid trying new methods of learning. It is because in general they believe that learning is a responsibility of someone else higher in the hierarchy. This is especially evident in situations when teachers occasionally trying to provide room and opportunities for individual initiatives but fail to give clear instructions. In such cases, students tend to delay doing assignments as long as possible or seek help from their mates. What makes the situation even worse is that due to the high power distance students are reluctant to ask teacher for clarification if assignments are not clear.

The combination of high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance and the restrictive nature of Bulgarian culture contribute to the general belief of the society that teachers are supposed to have all the answers and dominate the process of learning. In this way, the widely proclaimed learner-centred teaching gives way to the traditional teacher-centred teaching. This combination prevents the idea of equal participation and shared responsibility of teachers and learners in the teaching/learning process leaving little or no room at all for learner autonomy. The short-term orientation that places Bulgaria among the pragmatic countries combined with indulgence tend to kill not only autonomy but also motivation, the latter remaining a personal asset of few individual students.

One interesting issue is the widespread practice of cheating in the Bulgarian educational space. Collectivism in combination with power distance, high uncertainty avoidance and short-term orientation explain why cheating is favoured by students.

In the Bulgarian classroom, cheating is a way to demonstrate solidarity and to expect loyalty from the in-group members in case of need. Caring for the others, which is a typical feature of the feminine type of societies, also facilitates the process and suppresses whispers of a guilty conscience. Cheating is also enhanced by the high uncertainty avoidance and the short-term orientation. Students as a group unite their efforts in the opposition against teachers as a group. Teachers view cheating as intolerable behaviour and a reason for conflicts with students. Interestingly though, teachers generally change their attitudes towards cheating and plagiarism once they shift

from the role of a teacher to the role of a student, which happens when they attend postgraduate university programmes. In such cases, they start behaving as typical students and become cheaters themselves. This comes to show the dominant role of the group belonging, the high power distance and the high uncertainty avoidance in shaping the individual's behaviour in a particular social situation where truth is a relative concept.

As far as foreign language teaching is concerned, additional complexities can arise both when teachers and students come from different cultures and when they belong to the same culture. In the second case, teachers are compelled to teach a different culture embedded in the foreign language being quite competent in the language but not necessarily aware of the culture.

In my opinion, the role of foreign language teachers in Bulgaria is still traditional and the training environment is still teacher-centred. I do not claim that this is their fault. More often than not, they fall victims to the cultural expectations of students, parents and society. Teachers are seen as 'knowledge providers' who are proficient in the language they teach. They are the ones who are expected to detect and correct students' mistakes. They are the ones who are believed to possess the expertise in the respective foreign language that makes them the main, and often the only, source of knowledge of and about this foreign language. Even when parents are competent in the foreign language their children are studying, the prevailing belief that 'Teachers know best' demonstrate the irrevocable trust that students have in their teachers, who are committed to meet their students' expectations.

### **Conclusions**

From the above, it may be concluded that implementation of foreign approaches and innovations in any national education system, no matter how positive and well-intended they may be, can either be enhanced or prevented by factors embedded in the recipient native culture.. In summary, new ideas are more easily transferred between culturally similar countries and can be handicapped when the exporting and the recipient countries are located at the extremes of the cultural dimensions. This is the case with multiculturalism, learner autonomy and motivation, all of which are concepts that were invented in Western Europe corresponding to the basic belief and values underlying

Western cultures and which were exported to and imposed on several Eastern countries including Bulgaria through the EU educational institutions. EU directives are deemed to a failure if the national cultural specifics are not taken in consideration.

Another facet of the clash between cultures concerns teachers in Bulgaria and countries with a similar cultural profile. The conclusions below are especially valid for teachers of foreign languages as they carry a double burden. On the one hand, they belong to the national educational system, which is part of Bulgarian culture, and on the other, they are responsible for bridging the cross-cultural gap between Bulgarian culture and the foreign language and culture.

To be effective in carrying out their responsibilities and implementing the respective European directives to at least some extent, Bulgarian teachers, and especially foreign language teachers, need special training and new approaches. They should be trained to be aware of their own culture and be ready to change their own traditional attitudes to the educational process. They need to be trained to become cultural communicators who can mediate and motivate both students and parents to gain knowledge and adopt different learning practices. They should teach students to understand otherness in all its cultural dimensions and encourage students' autonomy, capability of making their own decisions and taking responsibility. They should adapt intellectually and emotionally to the fact that in other societies people behave and act in different ways and try to use good foreign practices that proved to be efficient in the classroom.

The suggestions above open a wide area for future research aiming at finding out which specific cultural traits facilitate or hinder the implementation of innovations in the Bulgarian classroom.

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